



Sixth Edition

SCRIPT ANALYSIS

FOR ACTORS, DIRECTORS, AND DESIGNERS

JAMES THOMAS

A Focal Press Book

ROUTLEDGE

Script Analysis for Actors, Directors, and Designers

Script Analysis for Actors, Directors, and Designers, Sixth Edition teaches the skills of script analysis using a formalist approach that examines the written part of a play to evaluate its potentials for performance and production.

This new edition offers a more streamlined experience for the reader and features new and revised content, such as a fully updated chapter on postmodern drama, new sections on Associative Thinking and Ambiguous Terms in the Introduction, and revised appendices featuring *The Score of a Role* and expanded treatments of Functional Analysis for Designers and Further Questions for Script Analysis. Explorations of both classic and unconventional plays are combined with clear examples, end-of-chapter summaries, and stimulating questions that will allow actors, directors, and designers to immediately incorporate the concepts and processes into their theatre production work.

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James Thomas is Professor and Director in the Department of Theatre and Dance at Wayne State University, Detroit. His publications include *The Seagull: An Insiders' Account of the Ground-Breaking Moscow Production*, *A Director's Guide to Stanislavsky's Active Analysis*, *The Art of the Actor Manager: Wilson Barrett and the Victorian Theatre*, and translations of *The Joy of Rehearsal*, *The Craft of Rehearsal*, and *Beyond Rehearsal* by Russian director Anatoly Efros. He was a contributor to *Russian Theatre in Practice* and his research has been published in *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Topics*, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, and *Scene*. He is also founding director of Wayne State University's Summer Study Abroad Intensive with the Moscow Art Theatre School.

Praise for the Fifth Edition

"James Thomas has written a great resource book for anyone creating theatre. The information is detailed, clear, and easily applicable to text analysis for actors, directors, and designers."

– Barbara Anger, Ithaca College

"This book has been overwhelmingly effective in meeting the goals I set for this course."

– Perry Crafton, West Texas A&M University

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Sixth Edition

James Thomas

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Preface

New in This Edition

This edition represents a substantial re-edit of earlier versions. The basic concepts and methodology remain unchanged; however, the length of the book has been considerably reduced, and the exactness of key terms and definitions has been improved. The Introduction has been reworked and contains two new categories: Associative Thinking and Ambiguous Terms. Concepts in Chapter 1, "Action Analysis," have been clarified. "The Score of a Role" from Chapter 6 has been moved to Appendix A. Appendix B, "Functional Analysis for Designers," has been reworked to make fuller use of Weldon Durham's exceptional methodology. "Further Questions for Script Analysis" has been reworked and moved to Appendix C.

In consideration of all these changes, I hope this version will be seen not just as a new edition but more importantly as an enhancement of thinking about script analysis.

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This Book and Its Point of View

This book is the outcome of teaching and directing experience acquired in theatre programs with a variety of educational objectives. In all of them, I found that at some point in the curriculum teachers require their students to analyze plays methodically before the experience of acting, directing, and designing. Most theatre programs require at least one course devoted exclusively to this purpose. In the process of teaching these and related courses, I have examined textbooks concerned with the crafts of performance and design and books related to the literary aspects of drama. In these, I found a scarcity of intelligible, wide-ranging discussions of the dramatic potentials of a play explained in a way that could be useful for actors, directors, and designers in their practical work. Consequently, in too many cases, I saw otherwise talented students unable to employ their talents to best advantage because they did not know how to study plays from a practical theatre point of view.

This book is intended to teach serious theatre students the skills of play analysis using a formalist approach. By this, I mean first that it

uses a standard system of classifications to study the written part of a play. The use of formalist methodology also means the book does not cover all the topics typically included in dramatic literature textbooks. There is no attention to dramatic forms or styles; no scrutiny of sociopolitical implications and no attention to the life, mind, or personality of the author—although the book relates to all these matters and they receive their due recognition in Appendix C. This narrowly focused approach is not new. We know how scientists adopt the practice of disregarding specific data outside their particular spheres of research. Likewise, professional actors, directors, and designers tend to avoid information outside the play and turn instead to the play alone when they are looking for the key to their work. Scientists and artists know full well that the neglected information exists, but they provisionally act as if it did not exist for the specific purposes of their work. This kind of restricted approach to script analysis claims no scholarly pretensions. The aim is practical and intended first and foremost for the stage.

Most of this book deals with script analysis, but since the acts of thinking and reading are connected with this process, I have provided an Introduction, which I hope enhances those activities. It begins with a brief account of the heritage of Formalist Analysis and then offers a few general guidelines for reading and thinking about plays.

The most substantial portion of the book is involved with understanding the underlying dramatic potentials of a play. I have attempted to keep the design simple. Chapter 1, "Action Analysis," teaches the mental part of Active Analysis, an innovative rehearsal methodology that Stanislavsky developed in his later years and which is explained in the Introduction. Chapters 2–9 each treat one of the basic elements of drama initially identified by Aristotle and later adopted and adapted by many teachers, scholars, and theatre practitioners. Although in practice all the features are mutually supporting, of course, the teaching method used here is to select one element as the essence of the play for a chapter and to provisionally set the others aside. This approach is what I believe is unique and most useful about this book. By narrowing the point of view in this way, readers can acquire the focus needed to learn the individual parts of plays and their possibilities. In the end, this approach shows that each element is inseparable from the whole meaning of the play, an understanding that is the foundation of all art. When Formalist Analysis is done well, it feels almost like the play is acting, directing, and designing itself.

A list of exercises appears at the end of each chapter. They are intended to stimulate creative thinking as actors, directors, and

designers engage in the pre-production process. The exercises cover almost every essential dramatic possibility found in a play. The Appendices introduce additional information for actors, directors, and designers, including other features imaginable in a play. The Bibliography supports this book's point of view.

Play analysis is a practical skill best taught through concrete examples, so I have tried to keep this book self-contained, while always using titles from the standard canon. It might be said this strategy relies on more familiarity with world drama than some readers are likely to possess. Nevertheless, in a time when so much writing about plays ends in cloudy theorizing, there is undoubtedly room for an approach that is frankly rooted in and dutiful toward the thing it writes about. Anyway, there should be no real problem here. Some readers of books like this one have already seen, read, studied, or talked about a lot of plays (or movies or novels, which make use of similar elements). They can add theirs in, with their evaluations.

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Oedipus Rex (ca. 430 CE) by Sophocles
Hamlet (1600) by William Shakespeare
Tartuffe (1669) by Molière
The School for Scandal (1777) by Richard Brinsley Sheridan
The Wild Duck (1884) by Henrik Ibsen
Three Sisters (1901) by Anton Chekhov
The Lower Depths (1902) by Maxim Gorky
Machinal (1928) by Sophie Treadwell
Mother Courage and Her Children (1937) by Bertolt Brecht
Death of a Salesman (1949) by Arthur Miller
A Raisin in the Sun (1959) by Lorraine Hansberry
Happy Days (1961) by Samuel Beckett
The Birthday Party (1964) by Harold Pinter
Fefu and Her Friends (1977) by Maria Irene Fornes
American Buffalo (1977) by David Mamet
Top Girls (1982) by Caryl Churchill
A Lie of the Mind (1986) by Sam Shepard
The Piano Lesson (1990) by August Wilson
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (1991) by Tom Stoppard
Angels in America, Parts One and Two (1992) by Tony Kushner

The scripts are available in single editions, anthologies, and sometimes online, and plot summaries can be found on various websites as well. I recommend selecting no more than two plays for detailed study in class, not from this list if possible. For my part, I have had success

using plays from our department's production season and studying the concepts in the book concerning those plays—open-mindedly rather than prescriptively. For introductory-level courses, realistic and classic plays tend to work best.

Besides being a system of classification and a mental attitude, Formalist Analysis is also a means of entry into a play script. When analyzing plays, it is best to begin with a plan and, taken altogether, formalist categories embody such a plan. This approach implies that readers can go through the categories one by one, and in the beginning, they are encouraged to do precisely that. While this approach to play analysis may seem excessively schematic, if not uninspired, it should not be troubling for long, because a schematic or even indifferent analysis is better than one haphazardly prepared.

This book can accommodate different teaching and learning strategies. I have organized and arranged it purposefully, but there is no obligation to cover all the topics or to study them in the order presented. Some instructors may select fewer categories to form the organizing principles for their course; others may choose to assign the readings another way or to use the book as a foundation for other approaches to analysis. I mention just three points.

Firstly, most of the book is within reach of beginning theatre students, but the material in Chapters 7 ("Idea"), 8 ("Dialogue"), 9 ("Tempo, Rhythm, and Mood"), and 10 ("Style") deals with more complex issues than those studied in previous chapters and are better suited to more experienced students. Chapter 11 ("A Case Study of Postmodern Drama: Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine*") is intended to show that formalist principles can be used to clarify the seemingly impenetrable stylistic traits occurring in avant-garde theatre since the end of the 1960s.

Secondly, the teaching philosophy that underlies this book goes something like this. Keep classroom lessons moving ahead to avoid becoming involved in the extended study of any individual play. Focus on teaching the skills needed to analyze plays in general rather than teaching the plays themselves. It is not essential to arrive at a final analysis of any single play, only to study the analytical process of doing so. Indeed, for teaching purposes, it may be better to avoid definitive conclusions altogether. After all, there is no possibility of arriving at a final, entirely justified analysis for production at this point. Play analysis is no more than the first stage, the mental stage, of the production process. Rehearsals and time at the drawing board always lie ahead to test, correct, and supplement discoveries made during initial mental analysis.

Thirdly, students can learn a great deal by studying as many topics as possible in their original order. I have found that with enough practice, sooner or later most students develop a way of quick, automatic understanding. Eventually, they go directly to those topics that apply to their needs for the play at hand and minimize the rest.

Readers should gather from my previous remarks all of what they need to know about the scope of this book, but I wish to add a few more comments about the bias of this book and warn of a misunderstanding that could readily occur. There are many ways to understand plays, and this book is concerned with just one of them. Although much of the systematic writing about plays is in the formalist tradition, it is not hard to find objections to this approach from those who favor other methods. No single method can ever be complete in itself, of course, but I hope to convince readers that many playable dramatic values can be discovered using this approach.

Writing a textbook on play analysis is a challenge, in part because there is no standardized vocabulary in the theatre as there is, for example, in music. There is not even total agreement about the most commonly used terms and definitions. As a rule, those who deal with plays every day develop their favorite personal aims, methods, and terms. It follows that there are many debatable terms and definitions involved. At the same time, one of the purposes of this book is to address this verbal disorder by encouraging standardization of the vocabulary used in talking and thinking about theatre practice. In support of this goal, I have intentionally chosen to use traditional terminology, not because traditional terms are best, but because standardized terms are best.

Without a doubt, we could devote a lot more thought to tracing the history of theatre terminology and establishing consensus definitions if we wished, but in a practical book, it is not a good idea to test the patience of readers with too much theory. Besides, for working artists, the conditions in the play alone are what is most important. I hope the terms and definitions, as well as my comments about the plays, are at least sound and practical. They are not meant to be authoritative or take the place of the teacher. Those who learned about them elsewhere or in some other form may wish to use these definitions as a basis for comparison with their own rather than thinking of them as conclusive statements, of which there are very few in theatre anyhow.

Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without the help of others, and the list of those to whom I am obligated is long. It begins with Francis Hodge, whose knowledge of play analysis and directing set standards that, in my opinion, few teachers could match. He taught me (among many others) how to think seriously about plays and play production, and his approach to the analytical process has helped to shape the general outline of this book. None of the errors found here should be attributed to him, but most of what is good and useful can be traced to his influence.

Mention also needs to be made of the late Russian director, Anatoly Efros, whose works I have been privileged to translate. As a director and exemplary inheritor of Stanislavsky's principles, Efros's ideas and practices have influenced not only myself but also whole generations of actors and directors. He is sure to become increasingly important in theatre generations to come as well.

For the invaluable opportunity to attend their rehearsals, classes, and lectures and for their patience with my endless questioning, I would like to thank the artist-teachers of the Moscow Art Theatre School-Studio, notably Anatoly Smeliansky (President), Mikhail Lobanov, Sergei Zemtsov, Igor Zolotovitsky, Ilya Bocharnikovs, and Viktor Rizhakov.

Diligent readers will see that I have additional sources, probably more than I even know myself. Among them are the writings of George Pierce Baker, Roland Barthes, Eric Bentley, Michael Chekhov, Harold Clurman, Tom F. Driver, Mikhail N. Epstein, Francis Fergusson, John Gassner, Kama Ginkas, Maria Knebel, Yuri Lotman, Frank McMullan, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, Konstantin Stanislavsky, F. Cowles Strickland, Georgi Tovstonogov, and Thornton Wilder.

Continued indebtedness goes to Weldon Durham for permission to adapt his *Functional Analysis for Designers* in Appendix B.

I wish to thank my colleague, Sarah Pearline, for her valuable assistance toward enhancing the content related to physical production in this edition.

Finally, but importantly, thanks go to my students for their thought-provoking comments and criticisms.

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Introduction

What Is Formalist Play Analysis?

Although some readers may often have heard the term formal, they may not have a firm idea of what it means. This uncertainty is understandable because it has taken on various meanings over time. Formal means doing something for appearance's sake, such as a formal wedding. Alternatively, it may convey a feeling of primness and stiffness. Maybe readers harbor an unconscious sense that formal means fixed, authoritarian, and inflexible. All these meanings have in common the notion of an arrangement that gives something its essential character or what Aristotle called "the inward shaping of an object." The etymology of the word confirms this. Formal comes from the idea of form or shape. The Latin word *forma* means something that shapes or has been shaped, but especially the shape of an artistic object. The English word formula is related to it, as are conformity, inform, reform, transform, and uniform.

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Studying the origin of the word leads to the present meaning of Formalist Analysis: the search for playable dramatic values revealing a central unifying pattern that forms or shapes a play from the inside and coordinates all its parts. Playable dramatic values are those features that energize actors, directors, and designers in their practical work. With these meanings in mind, formalist play analysis uses an established system of classifications to break up a play into its parts to understand their purpose and relationship. The underlying assumption of Formalist Analysis is that the plays themselves ought to be studied as opposed to abstract theories about or external circumstances of their writing. For actors, directors, and designers, plays should not only be a means to other kinds of studies but the primary objects of attention.

From his survey of the writing, construction, and arrangement of the best plays of his time, Aristotle developed principles and methods for their analysis and evaluation. His work is the basis of the formalist approach. He summarized the basics of drama and analyzed their inner workings and possible combinations. He insisted on the importance of the independent, artistic nature of plays. He reduced concern with outside social or moral issues and emphasized strict attention instead to internal structural design, placing particular

emphasis on the importance of plot as a unifying feature. His method was inductive—reasoning from detailed facts to general principles—rather than prescriptive. Aristotle’s principles are at the heart of the formalist tradition in criticism.

During the classical Roman period, and later during the Renaissance and the seventeenth century, scholars treated Aristotle’s insights as rigid prescriptions. Inquiring into the true motives behind this state of affairs is beyond the scope of this book, but we know now that the practical outcome left Aristotle with an undeserved reputation for pedantry, some of which lingers on to the present. As succeeding writers interpreted Aristotle with more insight and sensitivity, his reputation as a perceptive dramatic critic, for the most part, has been established for good.

Near the beginning of the twentieth century in Russia, scholar and critic Alexander Veselovsky refined the Aristotelian tradition by developing a system of specific aims and methods for the study of literature and drama. His refinements, like Aristotle’s, were based on the primacy of plot. Veselovsky was a leading member of the literary committee of Moscow’s historically significant Maly (Small) Theatre and promoted his principles among the theatre practitioners working there. His ideas were a likely influence on Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, a later member of the same committee and co-founder with Konstantin Stanislavsky of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898. Perhaps influenced by Veselovsky’s emphasis on plot and artistic coherence, Nemirovich and Stanislavsky promoted similar principles and methods among their actors and students. Significantly, their goal was not scholarly but practical: to help actors, directors, and designers understand and perform plays as logical and harmonious arrangements of actions.

Later, near the period of the Russian Revolution (1917), formalist ideas began to be applied on an even broader scale by a group of critics known as the Russian Formalists. Headed by Viktor Shklovsky and Evgeny Zamyatin, the Formalists were scrupulously attentive to the inherent artistic aspects of literature as opposed to any possible social or moral implications.

After 1928, the Soviet government suppressed Russian Formalism for ideological reasons, but its concepts and strategies resurfaced in the principles of New Criticism, which first appeared during the 1930s and flourished during the 1940s and 1950s in the West. New Criticism was an American movement led by John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren, all of whom were writers and poets as well as critics. In his book, *The New Criticism* (1941), Ransom coined the term and explained

the principles that identified this informal group, which also included R. P. Blackmur, Kenneth Burke, Cleanth Brooks, Robert B. Heilman, René Wellek, William K. Wimsatt, and Ivor Winters. Like the Russian Formalists, the New Critics advocated the meticulous study of the work itself. They disregarded the mind and personality of the author, literary resources, historical-critical theories, and political and social implications, which they considered an out-of-date, historical approach to criticism. To emphasize their belief in the autonomy of the literary work, the New Critics referred to the literary work as the “text” and termed their analytical approach “close reading.” Unlike the Russian Formalists, the New Critics gave special attention to the role of meaning in a literary work. Their ideas were presented in the books of René Wellek, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Heilman. Their writings helped to shift the focus of literary instruction away from peripheral concerns and back to the work itself.

Augmenting the ideas of the New Critics, the Chicago Critics maintained the principles of criticism should be explicitly stated and subject to logical explanation before their use in the study of individual works. The leaders of this group were R. S. Crane, Richard McKeon, Elder Olson, and Wayne Booth. Their principles were mainly four: analysis of ideas; analysis of symbolic expression, including the use of language; explication and interpretation; and historical research. Like Aristotle, the Chicago Critics privileged the form of the literary work as a whole.

The Cambridge Critics led a comparable movement in English literary criticism. Influenced by the writings of poet T. S. Eliot, William Empson led this group, which also included F. R. Leavis, I. A. Richards, Caroline Spurgeon, and G. Wilson Knight. Knight’s analysis of Shakespeare’s plays, *The Wheel of Fire* (1930), was one of the significant successes of the Cambridge Critics in the field of drama.

Many of the principles of the New Criticism were adopted by succeeding generations of American critics, including Francis Fergusson, Eric Bentley, Bernard Beckerman, Richard Hornby, and Jackson G. Barry, as well as theatre educators Alexander Dean, Hardie Albright, Lawrence Carra, William Halstead, F. Cowles Strickland, Curtis Canfield, Frank McMullan, Sam Smiley, and Francis Hodge, to name only the prime movers. Among English-speaking theatre professionals, the members of the Group Theatre beginning in the 1930s adopted the analytical methods of the Moscow Art Theatre. Thus, formalist thinking also supports the creative principles of Stella Adler, Harold Clurman, Richard Boleslavsky, Robert Lewis, Mordecai Gorelik, Elia Kazan, Robert Lewis, Sanford Meisner, Lee Strasberg, and many of their students and followers, as well as Viola Spolin, Robert Cohen,

Jean Benedetti, Charles Marowitz, Uta Hagen, and David Mamet. Among the most influential of Stanislavsky's followers in America was the actor and teacher Michael Chekhov (1891–1955), whose principles are so well known in the fields of film and television. After leaving Russia, Chekhov resided in Los Angeles, where he and his collaborator, George Shdanoff, taught several generations of Hollywood actors a variant of Stanislavsky's principles based on the importance of the imagination and furthermore utilizing a type of Formalist Analysis.

Beginning in the 1960s, drama and literature began to be influenced by movements in politics, psychoanalysis, sociology, anthropology, and religion in ways that seemed to defy traditional methods of criticism. Accordingly, a new generation of literary critics emerged who were dissatisfied with the self-imposed limits of the formalist approach. Within a decade more wide-ranging critical approaches appeared based on depth psychology, anthropology, semantics, structuralism, deconstruction, post-structuralism, semiotics, cultural studies, and theories of reception and communication, cognitive poetics, and more. Some of them—notably structuralism—have identified meanings previously overlooked in plays, and their innovative interpretations have significantly enlarged the expressive possibilities of performance and physical production. (See Appendix C.)

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Against this background, most if not all theatre practitioners today continue to avail themselves of the essential elements of a play that Aristotle identified. Some readers might argue this approach is not better than any other method at its best. After all, there are individual plays and periods of history where considerations outside the script are essential and need to be studied and even theatrically expressed as the situation requires. Conversely, understanding the crucial elements of a play is crucial to understanding the usefulness of any possible external contexts. In either case, in the theatre plays must eventually exist in the practical realm of live performance and not just in the intellectual field of scholarship. On stage, at least, the play itself is obliged to remain the final controlling factor. Formalist Analysis corresponds to this point of view. It offers more than intellectual insights; it supplies practical suggestions to energize actors, directors, and designers in their work.

Action Analysis

This book also teaches a specially modified type of Formalist Analysis called Action Analysis, which concentrates primarily on plot and pays comparatively little attention to the other elements of a play.

This narrowly focused type of analysis has a fascinating history and purpose of its own. It is not widely known in the English-speaking theatre world that the Moscow Art Theatre originated the period of analytical work done “at the table” (za stahl-ohm) before on-the-feet staging rehearsals. During this table period, the actors, under the guidance of the director, subjected to careful analysis all the motives, implications, relationships, characters, through-action, super-objective, and so on of the play. Table work replaced the traditional theatre practice whereby the author or theatre manager simply read the work to the company, after which everyone expressed their opinions and then proceeded to memorization and staging. Table work supplanted this old-style approach. Under the careful guidance of the director, table work made it possible to achieve a high degree of creative harmony in production by studying the play profoundly and defining its major thematic and artistic issues. Table work later became standard practice for virtually all theatre organizations, from the most significant professional companies to the least-known amateur performances.

However, as early as 1905 Stanislavsky began to have misgivings about table work. Since the director as an artistic leader always needs to comprehend the future result of the work, the internal structure of the play must be made clear to them so the director can imagine the path to guide the actors and designers toward the result. For that reason, the director is already always prepared for work more profoundly and multi-dimensionally than the actor or designer in the first period of their work together. Stanislavsky recognized that even the most patient and sensitive of directors (including himself) could hardly avoid becoming rehearsal dictators by their need to merge the actors and designers as quickly as possible with the director’s previously developed impression of the play. Hence, the practice of table work had unintentionally begun to deprive the actors and designers of their creative initiative. They were becoming disempowered recipients of the director’s plan, which in any case seemed to offer all the right answers. Stanislavsky eventually became disenchanted with the unequal relationship of this approach. He wanted to find a way of working that would put everyone back into direct contact with the play. After years of study, teaching, and practice, he decided the easiest and most accessible way to grasp a play was through the events of the plot. His new approach combined intellectual analysis with physical action and came to be known as “The Method of Active Analysis.” Active Analysis reduced table work to only what was necessary to find the “skeleton” of the play, the essential events, and their wellsprings. As soon as everyone understood this much, the first sensations of

the theme, through-action, and physical production would begin to emerge almost of themselves. This reduced, plot-based table analysis Stanislavsky called *mental investigation*. As soon as this part of the work was completed, Stanislavsky proposed moving forward to the next period of deeper analysis, which no longer took place at the table but rather in the form of improvised physical action. This part of the new method he called *physical investigation*. At this point, everyone worked on the external and internal life of the play simultaneously, thus directly experiencing what Stanislavsky called “the psycho-physical unity” of the creation process. Active Analysis combined mental and physical investigation means of *études*—improvised sketches based on the play’s significant events but using only the actors’ own words instead of the dialogue from the play. His new approach maximized psycho-physical work and minimized table work. My book, *A Director’s Guide to Stanislavsky’s Active Analysis* (2016), explains the whole process of Active Analysis along with a translation of Maria Knebel’s formative essay on its principles and methodology.

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All the same, a textbook on play analysis is not the place for a discussion of rehearsal practice. Consequently, the process of Action Analysis presented in Chapter 1 is only the first part of Stanislavsky’s Active Analysis, the part he called *mental investigation*. Action Analysis (Chapter 1) stresses the structural unity of the play, while Formalist Analysis (Chapters 2–10) provides a complete description of all the structural mechanisms of the play and their interrelationship. Action Analysis addresses basic questions, and Formalist Analysis addresses highly developed questions. Interestingly, the two approaches reflect the different personalities of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko. As an actor and teacher, Stanislavsky was always more interested in the processes of learning and working in a play than performance as such. Nemirovich was a playwright, critic, and director and his attention always focused on the production and its meaning, in which he always began with extensive table work. The concept of the *seed* explained in Chapter 1 was his, although Stanislavsky adopted it, and it has been integrated into Action Analysis here. Those who wish to learn more may want to refer to specific resources about the history and development of literary criticism listed in the Bibliography.

Dramatic Reading

Before beginning to study the principles of script analysis, it may be helpful to review some of the basic principles of reading by itself.

Initial learning about a play always begins with the written words of the play script. Then again, we not only read the play but the play also “reads us,” so to speak. If we fall short in this respect, the results are there for everyone in the theatre to see. Consequently, the quality of reading done at home before the beginning of rehearsals and production conferences is crucial. If initial readings are mistaken, every succeeding repetition reinforces the error. If the initial readings are confused, every succeeding repetition increases the confusion. For these reasons alone, reviewing some of the assumptions involved in reading and thinking can help actors, directors, and designers approach their work with something worthwhile to say.

Special Expressiveness

Crucial differences exist between literature and drama that orthodox literary criticism is not equipped to address by itself. When plays are treated primarily as literature, they are likely to be analyzed with the same principles as those used in the criticism of poetry and novel. This approach undervalues the independent legitimacy of theatre and drama, and indeed this book was written expressly as a challenge to it. Direct address (i.e., dialogue) in novels, for example, is supplemented with generous amounts of narration to explain plot, character, idea, and feelings not otherwise apparent. But unlike the literary author, the dramatist cannot interrupt the stage action to offer supplementary information, add meanings, or clarify complicated ideas without disturbing the forward progress of the play. When narration does appear in plays—via narrator or background story, for example—it cannot be merely literary, but must be first and foremost dramatic, which means it must convey dramatic action (i.e., purposeful action).

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Another feature that contributes to the extraordinary expressiveness of plays is their length. Even in a very long play, the number of words is small compared with a typical novel. Plays use far fewer words than novels do, yet they still need to contain at least as much dramatic potency as a novel to be theatrically compelling. Playwrights achieve this potency by infusing stage dialogue with a type of expressiveness that is absent, or at least less significant, in novels. Stage dialogue often looks very much like its literary cousin; sometimes it sounds so ordinary that it seems as if there is little conscious effort at all on the part of the playwright.

Nevertheless, this is a carefully crafted deception. The truth is that theatrical dialogue is a highly compressed and forceful form of verbal

expression. Speech is more concentrated on stage than it is in real life, and each word carries far more dramatic impact than in most other literature. Even a single utterance can pack a tremendous emotional wallop. "To Moscow . . ." "To be or not to be . . ." "Attention must be paid! . . ." That's why novelist Henry James, a dramatist and critic in his own right, maintained that playwriting required a more rigorous sense of construction than any other kind of writing.

Dialogue as purposeful action and radical compactness together create the need and opportunity for the unique expressiveness of dramatic writing. It follows from this that actors, directors, and designers have to understand this expressiveness to energize every particle of it in performance and physical production. Unfortunately, this does not always happen. Because the typical first experience of a play is the written script, its particular expressiveness is both easy to overlook and difficult to recognize. There is an involuntary confusion between the literary activity of reading and the professional activity of seeing, hearing, and feeling a play on the stage. Such trouble is even more likely to arise with plays that have strong literary merit like those of Shakespeare, Samuel Beckett, and Tom Stoppard, for example. To avoid under-reading and misreading, theatre practitioners have to be aware of two features of stage dialogue that are not readily apparent. First, the words in a script are far, far more expressive in a live performance than they are in the mental act of reading; and second, the words are only the tip of the iceberg, merely the visible part of what is happening deep inside a play. Energized acting, direction, and design is categorically essential to unleash a play's unique expressiveness.

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Pattern Awareness

The dictionary says that a pattern is a combination of qualities, acts, tendencies, and so forth, forming a consistent or characteristic arrangement. Plays contain patterns that shape plot, character, dialogue, meaning, and atmosphere. Patterns of this type shift continuously and run throughout the entire play. Play reading requires pattern awareness, which is the desire to seek and the ability to find these essential patterns. Pattern awareness means deepening the reading process by inquiring beyond surface appearances into underlying arrangements and operations. Pattern awareness also involves a change in the sense of time, a feeling of many things operating at once, resulting in a rich, lively interplay of characters, events, and meaning.

Historical Awareness

Historical awareness here means not only the intellectual skills related to the study of history but also the process of converting the sense of past, present, and future into the practical circumstances of everyday life. As Tom F. Driver rightly pointed out, historical awareness is itself a modern phenomenon and was a new way of thinking when it started to emerge early in the nineteenth century. To be a twenty-first-century artist, in other words, means to live with an intense awareness of history, change, and the passage of time. Realism, the dramatic form that we associate most readily with modern theatre, arose from a feeling that life cannot depend forever on the thinking of the past. In their external form, realistic plays indeed attempted to preserve the illusion of actual life precisely. In their content, on the other hand, these plays made use of historical awareness, then new, to expose the repressiveness of institutions usually hidden by "custom."

Myth Awareness

In nonrealistic plays, pattern awareness often takes the form of myth awareness. Myth is an essential feature of Carl Jung's psychology and Northrop Frye's literary criticism, but its application in play analysis is broader and less specialized. Here myth means merely a traditional story that describes the psychology, customs, or ideals of a society. It encompasses the related terms archetype (an original pattern) and ritual (a practice or pattern of behavior regularly performed in a set manner). Myths everywhere form part of a society's collective knowledge and are therefore treated as characteristic features of a culture.

Sometimes too much emphasis is placed on such indirect meanings in plays, of course, but myth awareness as intended here is more than random myth hunting. Nonrealistic plays, for example, have developed explicitly from the feeling that now more than ever we sense instinctively how each of us is part of a more substantial human experience in the world. Thus, mythic awareness is more than a supporting issue, as it is in most realistic and historical plays. On the contrary, mythic perception is an intentional attribute and a defining characteristic of nonrealism. Coincidentally, this is where nonrealistic plays connect with the very earliest forms of theatre. The dramatists of ancient Greece were directly expressing myth awareness when they based their plays on stories about the gods and heroes of their religion. Medieval religious drama, as well as much of the

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theatre of South America, Africa, Asia, the Asian subcontinent, and Indonesia, can also be traced to the same impulse.

Reading Plays

Active Reading

There are no hard and fast rules for reading plays, but specific reading and thinking skills are essential to understanding the unique kind of expressiveness they contain. The first essential skill is that of active reading. Active reading is a process in which a reader engages intellectually with the play they are reading. It requires focusing on the text by highlighting important passages, making notes in the margins, and repeatedly asking questions related to the text. In its initial stages at least, active reading is plain hard work. Inexperienced actors, directors, and designers sometimes think that experienced professionals sight-read a play in the way some musicians appear to sight-read a musical score, but this skill is as rare in the theatre as it is in music. A professional's reading of a play is a long and painstaking process. One characteristic of professionals is their recognition of the value of slow, active reading.

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Facts, Implications, and Inferences

Active reading also means concern for concrete facts and their connections and coincidences. A fact is a correct assertion about something, and concrete facts are those frankly stated in the dialogue as true. Facts in drama include identifications of people, places, actions, and things, but may also describe wishes as well as feelings and thoughts. Learning how to recognize facts accurately is a basic test of artistic awareness. In the earliest readings of a play, concrete facts need to be sought out to learn what is objectively said and done by the characters and the objective physical circumstances. Furthermore, since plays are orderly arrangements by their nature, making logical connections among these facts is essential for understanding the sequences and patterns found in them. We call these connections implications and inferences. Implications are hints or suggestions that are intended but not directly stated, and inferences are deductions from what is neither intended nor stated.

Recall the short scene in the garden from Act 2 of Arthur Miller's play, *Death of a Salesman*. Late at night after an argument with his son Biff, Willy Loman decides to plant vegetables in his backyard garden. As in several earlier scenes, Willy's absent brother, Ben, appears to him in a fantasy, and they carry on a short dialogue. In this scene,

the facts about planting a garden are important. We know that planting a garden requires specific physical activities and specialized tools. Since these are described precisely, this part of the action is not hard to understand. Indeed, some of the activities facts involved with planting a garden appear in Willy's actions: opening packages of seeds and reading the instructions, pacing off the rows for different plants, digging with a hoe, and planting the seeds in the ground. However, most readers can see right away that planting a garden is not all that is happening here. Things are happening that are not connected with planting a garden. Planting a garden is rarely undertaken late at night with a flashlight, and a gardener does not carry on a conversation about life insurance with an imagined figure as Willy does. Willy also possesses a sense of urgency that prevents him from paying too close attention to Ben. Planting a garden here is no longer what we think it is usually.

Implications and inferences now come into play, and they go beyond a literal reading of the scene. A closer examination of Willy's unusual behavior relates them to his innermost feelings and thoughts, particularly his profound sense of failure as a father to Biff. He is no longer merely planting a garden; he is performing a ritual act to prepare for his imminent suicide. The garden scene becomes a vital clue to the meaning of the whole play, which is a conflict between Willy's misguided ideals as a salesman and his parental responsibility toward Biff. Although accurate facts are a necessary starting point, implications and inferences have to be considered to arrive at an effectively dramatic understanding. Script analysis involves piecing the known and unknown together into a consistent and meaningful pattern just as detectives do in crime stories.

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Logical Thinking

Evidence of all kinds is necessary, but so is logical thinking, a step-by-step process where a response to one step must finish before another step is taken. Since many if not most plays organize themselves according to this principle, it follows that retracing their logic is the most productive way of understanding them.

It is worth noting as well that audiences are continually more knowledgeable, and that today's playwrights are demanding more brainpower from them than ever before. Influenced by the work of Vsevolod Meyerhold and Bertolt Brecht, modern playwrights ask audiences to understand what is happening logically, not just to experience the play in a passive emotional state. Aesthetic pleasure comes from penetrating the thinking of the characters over and above their

feelings and behaviors. As a result, the logic behind modern acting, directing, and design has to be at least a step ahead of the audience. A play production cannot be considered genuinely modern in the sense intended here unless the audience has something to think about and the creative team understands and expresses the thematic as well as emotional and physical worlds of the play.

Associative Thinking

Associative thinking considers things separate from the facts as seen and heard or from specific people, places, and things. Associative thinking reflects on events, ideas, features, and relationships separate from whatever possesses those features or shares those connections. So, for example, logical thinking thinks about this particular Angel in *Angels in America*, while associative thinking wonders about supernatural powers in general. Logical thinking considers *this* angel in *that* statue, *this* painting, or *that* film, while associative thinking wonders about spatial relations such as "in," ideas such as "America," or things such as "statue" or "painting" or "film." Logical thinking sees that the piano in *The Piano Lesson* is old, while associative thinking wonders about "oldness" or "African carvings." Logical thinking counts three sisters in the eponymous play, while associative thinking wonders about numbers, triads, prisms, and love triangles.

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In short, associative thinking deals with information by mixing patterns, seeing related links, connecting seemingly unrelated elements, and, for designers especially, spatial modeling. Associative thinking is most active when there is keen personal interest, as indeed there should be for creative acting, directing, and design.

Respect for Words

Another essential reading skill is the ability to understand the many meanings of words and the dramatic force that may be expressed with and through them. Art students pay attention to shape and color; music students listen for pitch and timbre. Those who wish to make a living in the theatre have to develop an appreciation of the expressiveness and emotion inherent in words.

Misleading Notions

Explaining some of the confusing notions commonly encountered in a play reading can help readers to avoid accidental misreading.

There are only a few of these readerly pitfalls, and they are not difficult to understand. Most of them are conclusions that do not follow from the facts or reasonings that do not make sense.

Affective Fallacy

According to critic William K. Wimsatt, this error results from confusion between the play and its results—what it *is* as opposed to what it *does*. It occurs when readers allow their momentary enthusiasms or the fleeting enthusiasms of the community to intrude on their understanding of the play. Maintaining enough emotional detachment is necessary to analyze a play correctly, but this is not always easy to do. Plays are meant to be emotional experiences, and many readers react strongly to the emotional stimuli in them. Actors, directors, and designers, for example, respond in highly personal ways, as indeed they must. It follows that in the scene from *Death of a Salesman* mentioned above, it is possible readers could reference their own families. They might, for example, be drawn to confuse their emotional memories with those of Willy Loman. Or readers who sympathized with Willy's economic plight might be tempted to confuse their point of view about economics with that of the world of big business described in the play. Personal experiences like these can be productive if readers are experienced artists or critics; but if not, they can lead to lax thinking or analytical lack of attention. At worst, a reader might become hopelessly, if unthinkingly, bogged down in self-analysis. Even so, it is still possible to maintain emotional distance while also responding emotionally to a play. The solution is to try to separate personal opinions from what is objectively present in the play, at least in the initial period of reading. As director Elia Kazan said, "The first job is to discover what the script is saying, not what it reminds you of." Absolute objectivity is impossible, of course, but impartiality and the tracing out of consequences need as much consideration as possible.

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Relativist Fallacy

The relativist fallacy occurs when a reader rejects a fact by declaring that the fact might be true for others but is not true for him/her. This sort of fallacy uses the following formula: Fact X is presented in a play. Reader A asserts that X may be true for others but is not true for him/her. Therefore, A is justified in rejecting X. This formula is the belief that truth is "relative" to a person, time, culture, place, and

more. This formula is *not* the belief that facts will be true at different times or about different societies, but the notion that a fact could be true for one person and false for another at the same time. Facts are not relative to readers, but beliefs are.

The Fallacy of Faulty Generalization

Readers are inclined to this error when they jump to a conclusion without having enough evidence to support it. When a reader uses “all” or “never” in statements about the play with only a casual concern for the information in the play itself, further close reading can normally correct the mistake. More problematic is inattention to contrary examples. If, after reading *Hamlet*, for instance, readers resort to the worn-out cliché about “the melancholy prince” or “the man who could not make up his mind,” they should test the conclusions with contradictory evidence. A little study shows that Hamlet is cheerful while welcoming the Players and decisive when dealing with the Ghost. A few contrary examples like these should be enough to disprove the original sweeping assertions.

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The Fallacy of Reductiveness

This kind of error reduces complex issues to a single thing, which is a frequent mistake even among experienced play readers. Reducing Hamlet to the Freudian “Oedipus Complex” is an extreme instance. So is thinking that *Mother Courage* is an anti-war play, that *A Raisin in the Sun* is a plea for racial integration, that *A Lie of the Mind* is a plea against spousal abuse, that *Angels in America* is a defense of homosexuality, or that *Three Sisters* is about the decline of the Russian intelligentsia. The spoken or implied “only” or “nothing but” is the giveaway. The motive behind attempts to reduce a play to less complicated equivalents is disparagement.

Genetic Fallacy

Related to reductiveness is the genetic fallacy or the fallacy of origins, which is an attempt to reduce a play to its sources in the historical world of the playwright. There is for many plays a large body of secondary writing about their historical circumstances, their authors’ life and times, and so forth. However, the question is not what does *Death of a Salesman* tell us about Arthur Miller’s personal life or American society after World War II, but rather what does it tell us about itself?

There may be some connections between a play and specific external features in the life and world of the playwright, but typically they are not as relevant in performance as some believe them to be. Seldom does a point-to-point correlation exist, and although Formalist Analysis teaches the fundamental unity of plays, it also shows that plays are complex independent objects deserving intellectual respect. Readers have to exercise caution before attempting to trace the meaning of a play to a tendency observed in the life or times of the author.

The Fallacy of the Half-Truth (Debunking)

This error occurs when readers use the same explanation for everything, with negative implications. In this way, the author, play, or character is discredited or debunked. Henrik Ibsen's plays regularly suffer from this fallacy. To say that Ibsen wrote grim Victorian social dramas carries the unspoken meaning that his plays are (1) gloomy and humorless, (2) the result of psychological neuroses in the playwright's temperament, and (3) Victorian social journalism masquerading as drama. Readers holding these opinions see Ibsen's plays as dull, depressing, and outdated. Another example is the statement that "Nothing happens in Samuel Beckett's plays—there's no plot." What is the hidden meaning behind this half-truth? The remedy for automatic skepticism is to study the script with an open mind. It is not just a question of finding any reasonable explanation and verifying it in the text but also of testing what connects to what against many points in the text.

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Frigidity (Insensitivity)

The next error turns in the opposite direction. Frigidity is author John Gardner's term for not showing appropriate concern about the characters or their predicaments. Frigidity here means not treating the thoughts and feelings in a play with the respect they deserve. Frigidity also includes the inability to recognize the seriousness of things in general. The standard of comparison is the deference sensitive persons—artists, for example—would display under the circumstances. Frigidity occurs when pulling back from genuine feeling through irony or sarcasm, or when looking only at the surface trivialities in a situation, playing the jester. The error is also frigidity when actors, directors, or designers knowingly start a production less than fully prepared.

Frigidity is one of the worst mistakes possible for an artist, any artist, and is often the cause of other errors. Theatre depends on

the sympathy we should have for other people's problems, for their pains and their joys. Drama opens minds and stimulates the sympathetic imagination by allowing us to understand the world through eyes other than our own. This outcome is even more valid for actors, directors, and designers whose responsibility it is to theatricalize the preconditions for empathy in the audience. Plays that call for an objective point of view (Beckett, Brecht, Fomes, Stoppard) also depend on a sympathetic understanding of the pressures confronting the characters, if not for the characters themselves. The ability to penetrate a spatial barrier and enter an object for a moment of complete identification—this is essential for an artist, any artist, and it is precisely the paralysis of this faculty that leads to the problem of frigidity.

Imitative Fallacy

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According to poet and critic Ivor Winters, saying that a work of literature is justified in employing miscommunication to express the idea of miscommunication is merely a backhanded justification for second-rate reading or bad writing. All feeling, if surrendered to, is a mode of "miscommunication," just as it may be a mode of loving, hating, flying, fearing, and so forth. Playwriting is not only a means of capturing feelings but also of arranging them in dramatic form, and play reading is an attempt to understand this process to communicate it. To the extent that any play or interpretation of a play produces a real lack of communication, real boredom, or real chaos, it fails in its intention to express itself satisfactorily on stage.

Intentional Fallacy

This fallacy is another of Wimsatt's formulations that are central to the principles of Formalist Analysis. It means trying to determine what the author's intention was and whether it fulfills itself, instead of attending to the work itself. Examples of this are easy to find because of the interest in literary criticism and the resulting frequency with which artists feel the need to speak and write about their work. Take the situation of Bertolt Brecht. It's impossible to measure the amount of misunderstanding that has resulted from a misapplication of his theoretical writings to productions of his plays (alienation effect, epic theatre, and so forth). Wimsatt correctly

argues in *The Verbal Icon* (1954) that a work of art is detached from the author the moment it is finished. After that, the author no longer has the power to “intend” anything about it or to control it, even if they could. Wimsatt’s opinion, however, should be taken as a warning more than as a strict rule. As with the other reading errors, the corrective to use against the intentional fallacy is repeated close reading of the play itself before attempting to make a definitive statement about the author’s intention.

Biographical Fallacy

This fallacy is the belief that a play is a thinly disguised account of events in the dramatist’s life. This type of approach distances itself from the play and goes instead into the playwright’s biography to find people, places, things, and events that seem to have counterparts in the play. And then it claims that the play is a picture of those people, places, things, and events. In its extreme form, this is a fallacy because it does not consider that playwrights use their imaginations when they write and that they can imagine improbable or even impossible things. It is common to say, for instance, that Sam Shepard wrote about the American West because he lived there for much of his life. However, if living in the West were all that was required to write such plays, many more people would be writing them. What about the plays Shepard wrote that do not take place in the American West? Biography can be potentially useful for actors, directors, and designers in their work, but it can seldom be a satisfactory argument for the interpretation of a production. The real problem is that biographical study might become a substitute for the hard work of studying the play itself, thereby completely overlooking the imaginative work of the playwright.

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Literal-Mindedness

Related to frigidity is the error of evaluating everything in the play based on its literal resemblance to real life. When it used as an adverse judgment, a statement like “the Angel in *Angels in America* and Sutter’s ghost in *The Piano Lesson* are hard to believe because science tells us there are no such things as angels or ghosts” is an illustrative if primitive example. This thinking possibly stems from a misunderstanding of the idea of reality in acting, called emotional honesty. The quality of observed reality in a play has little direct connection with the play’s

potential for expressing psychological truth (i.e., logical behavior). A play can be unrealistic in all its external features and still permit emotionally honest acting. Emotional honesty and stage reality are separate, though related, issues and do not inherently contradict one another. Whatever the source of the confusion, the point is that everyday reality is irrelevant to understanding a play as an artistic experience. Each play creates its own "reality." "The laws of art are explainable by the laws of art; they are not justified by their realism" (Shklovsky quoted in Lemon and Reis, 1965: 37).

Second-Hand Thinking

Although second-hand thinking is not a fallacy as such, it is still a common problem. Second-hand thinking means relying too much on other people's opinions, especially when dealing with difficult material. The methods of the classroom and the present-day interest in literary criticism have encouraged the habit. Unfortunately, addiction to the judgments of others, even those of experienced scholars and critics, and even when they are accurate, can inhibit self-confidence and independent thinking. Artists, especially learning artists, should beware of cutting themselves off from new experiences, feelings, or words by relying too much on established opinion rather than on direct contact. Script analysis should initially be a solo experience. Consult experts afterward.

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Over-Reliance on Stage Directions

Second-hand thinking also extends to stage directions, which are notes incorporated in a script or added to it to convey information about its performance not immediately evident in the dialogue. Ordinarily, stage directions are concerned with the actor's movements on stage and with scenery and stage effects. Plays written in the past tended to keep stage directions to a minimum, but over the years their use grew more widespread until, by the end of the nineteenth century, they were often long and very elaborate. The prefaces to George Bernard Shaw's plays, for instance, often run to dozens of pages and contain explicit—if amusingly misleading—information for actors, directors, and designers. There is evidence among modern playwrights, however, of a reversal of this trend.

Besides, stage directions do not always come from the playwright. According to the practice of play publishers, stage directions are just as likely written by the original stage manager from the staging of

the original director and the physical production of the original designers. Or they were written by the literary editor of the text, as in the case of Shakespeare, for example. Even when one is confident the author has written the stage directions, it is prudent to recall the advice of the genius designer and director, Edward Gordon Craig. In *On the Art of the Theatre*, Craig contended that stage directions are an “infringement” on the artistic rights of actors, directors, and designers. From this, he argued that playwrights should cease writing them altogether! Craig’s prejudices are notorious, of course, and his position on this subject was extreme, but he had a point. Stage directions are intended to supplement the dialogue, not replace it. They should not be confused with the play itself. Many professional actors, directors, and designers, as well as producers and agents, seldom read stage directions, any stage directions. They want to work with the play itself and allow it alone to tell them everything they need to know, which is the point of view of this book.

Ambiguous Terms

Realism and Naturalism in Drama

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The terms realism and naturalism are so closely linked that they are often used interchangeably. Both are styles that attempt to treat life “as it is” by dealing with everyday experiences and activities. Regardless of their shared aims, however, their difference is not so much in the observable activities of life as in their worldviews. Realism depends on the principle of self-determination, on the choices characters make independently, without external influence and interference. In contrast, naturalism relies on the principle of social-determinism, the choices characters make owing to social conditions, heredity, environment, and, more recently, technology. In short, the difference between realism and naturalism is primarily philosophical and secondarily physical. It is the play’s realistic or naturalistic worldview that supplies the basis for plot and character and, of course, their expression through acting, directing, and design.

Representational, Presentational, and Non-Objective Design

Discussion of realism and naturalism in drama understandably leads to the terms presentational, representational, and non-objective design. Representational design seeks to depict actual people, places,

and things from reality. Its origins go as far back as the prehistoric figurines of gods and goddesses, and it is perhaps the most recognizable approach to scenery, costumes, and lighting design. Since it involves subjects that are immediately recognizable, it tends to be the easiest to accept, at least from an audience's perspective. Presentational design chooses its subjects from reality but depicts them differently from how they appear in reality. Emphases on lines, colors, and shapes transform the look of the subjects while retaining specific recognizable features. Non-objective design chooses nothing from reality; it is based entirely on associative artistic motives, using the elements of design primarily to create visually or emotionally stimulating experiences. Something to remember is that representational, presentational, and non-objective design typically overlap each other in theatre practice and regularly do so whenever it is considered necessary.

Instinctive, Representational, and Experiential Acting

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Since Stanislavsky was the first to categorize these three approaches to acting, we may turn to him for their meanings, which have mostly become accepted throughout the field. Instinctive acting, he said disapprovingly, depends on the inspiration of the moment. Some of these moments may be remarkable, others lackluster, but most are ordinary, without unique or distinctive features. By its nature, the quality of instinctive acting is unpredictable. Representational acting seeks initially to feel and experience the life of the character. The work that follows entails the search for an external form that gives plausible visual expression to this spiritual content, which is then performed before an audience. Stanislavsky greatly respected those actors who perfected this approach because they have started by attending to life itself. Experiential acting goes one step further in that every moment of the role is freshly felt and freshly physicalized for each performance; nevertheless, with this necessary qualification—that feelings and physicality do not arise from the repetition of pre-imagined externals but by experiencing, “living through” (переживание/pair-eh-zhi-vahn-ee-yeh), the character's actions holistically. Experiential acting does not fabricate “living through,” but prepares for it, sets out toward it, and looks for it in indirect ways. It is important to point out that Stanislavsky believed most if not all good acting was a combination of instinct, representation, and experience.

Wrap-Up

We actors, directors, and designers rarely get to choose the plays we perform, direct, or design. Even when we do, the plays do not always gain our affection as much as we might want them to. Professional script analysis—the approach introduced here and taught in the following chapters—is a method for placing actors, directors, and designers in a sustained creative state for a play, any play. Paraphrasing Stanislavsky, play analysis is like a basic grammar that should permanently take root in us so that we do not have to think about it at the moment of creation. Nor is professional analysis a commandment or a required style. It is not necessary to force script analysis, but to allow the play to open for itself.



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Action Analysis

Why Action Analysis?

The Introduction stated that Formalist Analysis proceeds by gathering lots of details from the play and then forming conclusions about the whole work. Because Formalist Analysis attempts to cover most if not all of the standard dramatic potentials of a play, which almost guarantees its practical success. However, attention to detail is also time-consuming and loaded with fine points. In the middle of such a project, readers might become so involved in the details that they can sometimes lose sight of the whole play. At some point, they may need to step back and consider what their study is leading to. Action Analysis provides this opportunity. **Action Analysis is a specially reduced type of Formalist Analysis based primarily on the events of the plot.** This method is not intended as a shortcut to creativity, however. Action Analysis may be quicker and more straightforward than Formalist Analysis, but by the same token, it is also less complete.

1

Thinking “Eventfully”

Stanislavsky believed the easiest and most accessible way to come to terms with a play is through the events of the plot. Action Analysis starts by identifying the most important of these events and then builds on this foundation. Events in this sense are not just routine incidents, but those that identify what Stanislavsky called “the effective truth of a given situation.” By this, he meant incidents that would not or should not usually happen, a break with the play’s status quo,

a significant departure from the social norm of the play, something special the characters and their usual way of behaving cannot account for. **Events are turning points in the course of the stage action.**

Examples of events like this include: A messenger arrives with news from a distant city-state (*Oedipus Rex*); the Ghost of the dead king appears (*Hamlet*); a wayward son returns home (*The Wild Duck*); a father forces his daughter to break her engagement (*Tartuffe*); two threatening strangers arrive (*The Birthday Party*); an everyday object becomes invested with extraordinary power (*Fefu and her Friends*, *American Buffalo*). The significance of an event is directly proportional to the degree to which it changes the characters and their behavior—the greater the change, the greater the event.

How to recognize an event in everyday life? Imagine a husband and wife quarreling about the quality of a painting and then going to a police station to settle their disagreement. The police officer, having established that no crime has taken place, refuses to write up a report because from his point of view there is no event; that is, no crime has been committed. For a psychiatrist or art historian, however, a quarrel between a husband and wife over the quality of a painting is a genuine event because it changes the behavior of the participants' relationship to each other or the picture or both. In other words, the same quarrel represents something meaningless from one point of view and something significant from another.

How to understand what constitutes an event in a play? According to Stanislavsky, one sure way to recognize an event of this type is to remove, as it were, the given event from the play and try to understand how its absence would affect the characters. What would happen if, for example, if Ophelia had disagreed with her father and Claudius's plan to eavesdrop on her conversation with Hamlet? If she had not been compelled to lie to Hamlet, she would have had an entirely different destiny. She would not have suffered the trauma of Hamlet's rejection and the terrible loneliness that led her to suicide. Ophelia's sad fate comes about from her dishonesty in the eavesdropping scene. Understanding what constitutes an event like this one requires thinking eventfully (consistent with the action), instead of just verbally (consistent with the dialogue).

Action Analysis also makes a distinction between essential and less essential events. A travel illustration will help to explain this. A regular flight from Boston to Miami, for example, stops briefly at major cities along the way: Philadelphia, New York, and Atlanta. To become familiar with those cities, an air traveler would need to stop over and spend some time there. Travelers who wished to know more

about the areas surrounding the major cities would need to board an intercity bus that stops at the suburbs and commuter cities. Hardy travelers who took their bicycles with them on the bus would be able to visit neighboring small towns and villages as well. Action Analysis (this chapter) may be compared with the regular flight with stopovers at major cities. Basic Formalist Analysis (Chapters 2–6) may be compared with travel by bus through the adjacent cities. Also, Advanced Formalist Analysis (Chapters 7–10) may be compared with travel by bicycle throughout the heartlands.

1. *Chain of External Events*

The chain of external events is a chain of social exchanges that change the behavior of everyone present. Social exchanges consist of arrivals and departures, hellos and goodbyes, meetings and separations, secrets and disclosures, encounters and avoidances, public announcements and private monologues/soliloquies, warnings and concealments, discoveries and concealments, captures and releases, quarrels and love affairs, public speeches and private thoughts, births and deaths, illnesses and recoveries, decisions and postponements, and the like.

3

What are the external events in 1,1 of *Hamlet*? There are several: the changing of the guard, the arrival of Horatio, the first appearance of the Ghost, a discussion about an earlier appearance of the Ghost, the second appearance of the Ghost, a discussion about Denmark's preparations for war, and a decision to inform Hamlet about the Ghost. Which of these events is happening for the first time, would not usually occur, breaks with the play's status quo, and changes the characters' behavior? Most readers would agree that the appearance of the Ghost is significant, but then why is Horatio present? Recall that Marcellus has previously informed Horatio about the appearance of the Ghost, but Horatio was unwilling to relay such superstition to Hamlet. So, Marcellus has asked him to come and see for himself. This scene shows Horatio's first paranormal experience. Accordingly, the crucial event in the scene is Horatio's meeting with the Ghost, and the external event is "Horatio encounters the Ghost."

Using an equally economical means of expression, the chain of external events in *Hamlet* might look something like this:

1,1 Horatio encounters the Ghost.

1,2 Claudius announces the regime change.

- 1,3 Laertes departs for France.
- 1,4 Hamlet encounters the Ghost.
- 1,5 Hamlet decides to take action.
- 2,1 Polonius warns Ophelia about Hamlet.
- 2,2 Claudius decides to spy on Hamlet.
- 3,1 Hamlet encounters Ophelia.
- 3,2 Players arrive.
- 3,3 Claudius's soliloquy.
- 3,4 Hamlet warns Gertrude.
- 4,1 Claudius decides to deport Hamlet.
- 4,2 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern capture Hamlet.
- 4,3 Hamlet departs from Elsinore.
- 4,4 Hamlet encounters Fortinbras.
- 4,5 Laertes returns to Elsinore.
- 4,6 Hamlet returns to Elsinore.
- 4,7 Claudius decides to murder Hamlet.
- 5,1 Hamlet encounters Ophelia's funeral.
- 5,2 Hamlet is murdered as he murders Claudius.

4

This list is a simplistic summary of a very complicated play. Some readers will say it is too simplistic or that some of the descriptions are misguided. Remember, however, that Action Analysis is not intended to be complete or letter perfect, but merely quick and functional. The explanations offered here are certainly not meant to be definitive but only demonstrations of the thinking process involved with identifying external events in Action Analysis. On the other hand, a plain and simple point of view like this can be useful for seeing through the avalanche of words in a play, especially one by Shakespeare. Whatever the case may be, more analyses and rehearsal always lie ahead to fine-tune over-hasty or inaccurate conclusions. Action Analysis is still provisional, and meant to be changed.

2. Reviewing the Facts

Reviewing the facts means trying to understand the reasons and motives behind the facts and events of the play by asking Who, What, Where, When, Why, How, and What for. As a stand-alone process, reviewing the facts is used regularly throughout Action Analysis, and a convenient opportunity arises just after identifying the external events. We already performed an abbreviated review of the facts for 1,1, when seeking to understand the external events in that scene. Just now we are approaching the task in a more organized manner.

Who are the characters? Denmark's royal family and their official attendants and security guards, in addition to Norway's new ruler and his army.

What is happening? The new king summons the young prince and heir-apparent from college to attend his father's untimely funeral, his uncle's opportunistic coronation, and his mother's surprising marriage to his uncle. Unlike everyone else at court, Hamlet is unwilling to accept the fact that his uncle murdered his father, married his mother, and usurped the throne.

Where does the action occur? The royal castle of Denmark, the surrounding territory, and nearby harbor.

When does the action occur? Presumably during the late medieval period but expressed through the imagination of an English Renaissance playwright.

Why does it happen? It is a sudden "regime change" in which the Ghost of Hamlet's father expects his son to avenge his murder, while the young man is conflicted about carrying out such a complicated and ethically ambiguous responsibility.

How does it happen? The King demands to move forward with the critical affairs of state, but the strange and unpredictable behavior of the young prince is making life worrisome for everyone.

For what purpose does it happen? The young prince is obsessed with getting at the truth behind everyone's astonishingly indifferent (to him) behavior.

Periodically reviewing the facts as more information collects helps actors, directors, and designers to keep track of the big picture, which is not always easy to do in the hustle and bustle of preparing a play for production. Adding a complete formal review of the facts to the growing catalog of information at this point creates a solid foundation from which to embark on the following parts of Action Analysis, which are not so readily apparent.

3. Seed

Action Analysis also looks for a distinctive pattern that is latent in the external events up to now. At first, it may seem that literary scholars have already covered this ground. A search for *Hamlet* in the Modern Language Association database, for example, lists over 3,000 articles on subjects (patterns) ranging from afterlife and allegory to violence and wordplay. *Hamlet* contains many, many patterns, but there is a difference between a pattern as a literary motif and the special kind of pattern called for in Action Analysis. The dictionary states that a motif

is “a recurring prominent thematic element.” Searching for interesting motifs is standard practice in literary scholarship, where the goal is intellectual insights. The question for actors, directors, and designers is not what motifs take account of, not what motifs include, but what they exclude. The point is that motifs cover just part of a work. In the theatre, the whole play has to be produced, not just the parts that match up with a motif. By relying too much on literary motifs, actors, directors, and designers may be led to assume that the rest of the work is merely padding for the sake of entertainment. Or worse, lapses on the part of the dramatist. Or worse still, they might apply additional literary motifs to fill the “vacant” parts, a practice that would undermine the artistic unity of the play.

The question clears up when we think about the nature of pattern in drama. While a motif may illuminate one or two “thematic elements,” the special pattern sought in play analysis, in Action Analysis, ought to illuminate the entire play. The creative processes of actors, directors, and designers require a steady, consecutive embodiment of this pattern into a unified representation. Action Analysis expedites this process by using an analytic concept called the seed, which provides a concise vision of the whole play. Formalist Analysis makes use of a comparable pattern through the concepts of super-objective and main idea, which will be covered in subsequent chapters.

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How to find and identify this seed? Signs can be seen in the so-called *hamartia* (hah-mahr-tee-uh) or “tragic flaw,” a concept Aristotle used to identify a particular trait in the hero that brings about her/his downfall. Even in comedies, farces, romances, and tragicomedies, every hero has a “flaw” that stands in the way of achieving her/his super-objective. The hero is stuck, unable to grow or succeed on account of this unacknowledged weakness. Russian director Kama Ginkas views the “tragic flaw” as a violation or neglect of one of the Ten Commandments from the Bible, Torah, and Koran—commandments such as “You shall not kill” or “You shall not commit adultery” (Ginkas, 2003: 204–205). Bear in mind, though, that the hero’s character flaw is certainly not always tragic or sinful. Many times it is a difference in social standards arising from inexperience or ignorance, an error of common sense, a bias in temperament, or wrongdoing.

In any case, the hero’s character flaw is by its very nature the primary source of conflict and therefore the driving force of the play. By this logic, Nemirovich-Danchenko reasoned that the hero’s character flaw is not only a trait of the hero but also the essence of all the events of the play. In other words, Nemirovich-Danchenko took the tragic

flaw associated with the protagonist and repurposed it for shaping a vision of the whole play. This expanded, unifying function of the tragic flaw Nemirovich-Danchenko called the seed. **The seed of the play is its emotional and intellectual essence.** A seed in nature is a source of development and growth, Nemirovich-Danchenko said, and the seed of a play is the source of its development and growth as a creative work. In the finest and subtlest plays, it is possible to lose sight of the seed, but it is always present, nonetheless.

To explain this repurposing of the hero's character flaw as the seed, Nemirovich-Danchenko cited Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* (1876), which is about a disastrous love affair. As a consequence, "passion" (sexual desire) is Anna's tragic flaw *and* the essence of the whole story (Nemirovich-Danchenko, 1984: 201–205). Notice that this seed is also the reference point for the commandment "You shall not commit adultery." Passion explains the nature of Anna's violation of this commandment, while at the same time exposing her society's attitude (social standard) toward passion and her behavior. We may barely perceive this clearly in the pages of the novel because we become so involved in the particulars of life presented there. So much is happening from page to page as we observe how the characters under- or overrate the influence of this commandment in their social relationships or when they hide behind extenuating circumstances to explain it away. Much of the action may show little outward connection to the seed of passion, but all the same, passion is what holds it all together.

What sort of troublesome "character flaw" is found in Hamlet? A careful reading of 1,2 shows what is troubling him even before he learns about his father's murder. He suggests what this might be when his mother scolds him for mourning his father's death too unreasonably and too openly [emphasis below added]:

QUEEN. Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off,
And let thine eye look like a friend on
Denmark.
Do not for ever with thy vailed lids
Seek for thy noble father in the dust.
Thou know'st 'tis common. All that lives
must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.
HAMLET. Ay, madam, it is common.
QUEEN. If it be,
Why **seems** it so particular with thee?

HAMLET. **seems**, madam, Nay, it is. I know not
'seems.'

'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected havior of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of
grief,

That can denote me truly. These indeed
seem,

For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within which passeth show,
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

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Hamlet is insulted and angered that anyone would think him capable of falsely "seeming" (pretending, faking) anything, much less his feelings for his father. This accusation is particularly hurtful coming as it does from his mother, whom Hamlet loves but already suspects of deceit herself. At the end of the scene, he expresses his anger in a famous soliloquy ("O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt . . ."). Evaluating Gertrude's hypocrisy, Hamlet cannot comprehend why she would so soon forget her first husband—whom she "seemed" to love—and then straight away marry her brother-in-law, no less. How could she change her affections so quickly? Either she was lying then, or she is lying now. "Frailty, thy name is woman!" What is angering Hamlet is dishonesty—that of Gertrude, Claudius, and all the palace cronies who colluded with them in this remarkable regime change.

Hamlet's obsession with stamping out dishonesty leads to the character flaw and seed of *idealism*. Hamlet's obsession is a serious character flaw (albeit unknowingly) because it puts his *idealism* above everything else, disregarding the human costs. Let's explain. The dictionary defines idealism as the practice of forming behavioral standards from abstract ideas and, for better or worse, living entirely under their influence. Hamlet is not just an idealist but an obsessive idealist, as evidenced by his continual attempts at self-evaluation. Thus, obsessive idealism is a truth so sure of itself that it needs no proof. Hamlet demonstrates all these traits in his obsession with exposing deceit, regardless of its possible justification.

His is the fate of an obsessive idealist in an unidealistic special world. In search of what Hamlet imagines to be the truth, he represents the actions of others as they might or should be rather than as

they are or must be; his obsessive idealism conflicts with real-world facts; and he is obsessed with an idea ("truth"), while almost throwing away his life (and that of others) in its pursuit. With the possible exception of Oedipus and Sherlock Holmes, Hamlet is perhaps the most obsessive truth seeker in all literature.

If idealism is an accurate formulation of the seed, by definition, it will function as the inward bond of all the successive events in the play. Understandably, here is where reviewing the facts becomes useful once again. Earlier, we reviewed the facts to identify external events. At this point, we are reviewing the facts to test and hopefully validate the seed as idealism. Reviewing the facts is in narrative form this time, instead of a strict list as before.

Hamlet has returned from the University of Wittenberg to attend his father's funeral, his uncle's coronation, and his mother's remarriage. Hamlet is a prince, he is young, and he has led a privileged life. He loves books, music, and theatre. Moreover, he is under the influence of the radical idealism from his college classes, particularly the study of philosophy, which has an unusual fascination for him. He is inexperienced in love and other aspects of the real world as well, specifically the rough-and-tumble of politics and statecraft. On the other hand, Hamlet is no fool. He may lack real-world experience, but he makes up for this with superior intelligence, sensitivity, and perception. Hamlet is practically a poet or philosopher in his sensitivity to the subtleties of human motives and behavior. He is also loyal and kind. In 3,2, Ophelia, who is in love with him of course, considers him noble, a courtier (gentleman), a soldier (an excellent fencer), a scholar, and handsome, witty, poetic, athletic, and fashionable. He attracts attention wherever he goes. Like certain modern royals everyone recognizes, everyone loves and admires him. Prince Hamlet!

For all Hamlet's apparent personal advantages, however, it seems as though he comes from another planet. He does come from another world, from the future, from the Renaissance, where radical idealists like himself insist on the dignity and unlimited potential of the individual human being. Here on earth, he is attempting to come to terms with his father's traditional feudal ideals, namely the selfish, brutal, practical ideals that form the framework of the play. His radical idealism cannot tolerate the atmosphere of lies, murder, corruption, careless love, disloyalty, hypocrisy, apathy, philistinism, sin, and the rest, which characterize much of human life on earth, or at least it may be so in Denmark. He lives in a bubble and must breathe a particular kind of pure air to survive—the atmosphere of obsessive idealism. He is a perfectionist with high standards. If he loves, it must

be pure love. His friendships must be loyal and without constraint. If he feels an emotion, it must be genuine, never forced or affected. If he speaks, it must always be the unvarnished truth. Even his mastery of fencing must be letter perfect. Moreover, he has a ruthless conscience to keep watch over his high ideals. Regrettably, he expects others to hold the same ideals as he does, and he can be cruel to them if they do not live up to his standards. Indeed, Hamlet might even be a little proud of his radical idealism. After all, he must be an exceptional individual to have such lofty standards. ("I have that within which passeth show.") Doesn't he accept the dueling challenge as an opportunity to show off just a little before Claudius and the court? Sorry to say, Hamlet's ideal world does not exist, either in Denmark or anywhere else on this earth. It is a figment of his untested and over-heated idealism. In the end, of course, he becomes aware of this problematic character trait, this wrongdoing, this "flaw" in his character. His idealism may have been radical and even impossible, but at least he stood up for something important—the pursuit of truth. Paraphrasing an American politician, Hamlet might have said: "Idealism in defense of truth is no vice!"

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This review of the facts shows how a simple seed like radical idealism can develop into a vast, complex play, become filled with meaning, and grow to be a brilliant work of art. Naturally, there is no uniformity of opinion about *Hamlet*, and there are undoubtedly other ways to describe its seed. Rigorous attention to each scene of Hamlet supports the finding that idealism—for, against, and everything in between—resonates throughout the play. Idealism is the play's "DNA," so to speak, providing the "genetic code" that governs the actor/character's development, director's plan, and designers' image-making.

4. Chain of Internal Events

Internal events connect the external events firmly to the seed, making all the events work together toward a single core of meaning. This step of Action Analysis provides another opportunity for reviewing the facts, this time to make sure the specified seed is indeed a "pre-existing condition" connecting the external events.

In 1,1, Horatio encounters the Ghost. The focus of the seed here is Horatio, who, as Marcellus says, does not believe in ghosts. Horatio, like Hamlet, is a student at the University of Wittenberg, where he learned about the new "rational thinking" emergent in philosophy at the time and was fascinated by it. Moreover, since there is no place

for the supernatural in rational thinking, Horatio does not believe in ghosts. The guards, Barnardo and Marcellus, are less formally educated, but they have the advantage of real-life experience. They have seen the Ghost. For the first time, Horatio's ideal of rational thinking comes face to face with something he cannot explain. He is so unnerved that he cannot bring himself even to say the word ghost: he calls it a "thing" and an "illusion." Accordingly, we can express the internal event in 1,1—the connection between the external event and the seed—as "The Ghost defies Horatio's rational idealism." In this scene, idealism is confirmed a "pre-existing condition" and consequently a useful seed.

In the latter part of 1,2, Horatio informs Hamlet about the Ghost. Hamlet's idealism was already challenged by his mother and stepfather earlier in the scene; now he learns from his best friend that a "figure" or "apparition" (not a yet ghost) resembling his father has appeared to Marcellus and Bernardo the past two nights, although it would not speak to them. Hamlet studied Renaissance philosophy with Horatio, and he does not accept ghosts as real either. Perhaps both friends feel a little ridiculous even talking about it. Nevertheless, it looked like Hamlet's deceased father and seemed to be searching for someone, doubtless Hamlet himself. Five shocks to Hamlet's idealism occur in this scene: Claudius usurps the throne, mourning is cut short for his dead father, his mother is unfaithful, his return to Wittenberg is forbidden, and now what seems to be an "apparition" of his father has appeared. Therefore, idealism continues to be a useful seed.

If idealism as a valid seed for the entire play, the following sequence emerges with external events verbally connected to their corresponding internal events through the seed.

- 1,1 External event: The Ghost appears to Horatio.
Internal event: The Ghost shocks Horatio's *idealism*.
- 1,2 External event: Claudius takes over the throne.
Internal event: Hamlet's defends his *idealism*.
- 1,3 External event: Polonius warns Ophelia against Hamlet
Internal event: Polonius undermines Ophelia's *idealism*.
- 1,4 External event: Hamlet meets the Ghost.
Internal event: The Ghost incites Hamlet's *idealism*.
- 1,5 External event: Hamlet learns that Claudius murdered his father.
Internal event: The Ghost challenges Hamlet's *idealism*.
- 2,1 External event: Ophelia alerts Polonius about Hamlet's behavior
Internal event: Polonius undermines Ophelia's *idealistic love*.

- 2,2 External event: Claudius orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet
Internal event: Hamlet tests his *idealism* on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
- 3,1 External event: Claudius and Polonius eavesdrop on Hamlet and Ophelia.
Internal event: Hamlet scolds Ophelia for betraying their *idealistic love*.
- 3,2 External event: The "mousetrap scene."
Internal event: Hamlet tests and celebrates the apparent success of his *idealism*.
- 3,3 External event: Claudius attempts to pray.
Internal event: Hamlet attempts to put his *ideals* into action.
- 3,4 External event: Gertrude appeals to Hamlet.
Internal event: Hamlet scolds Gertrude for betraying her *ideals*.
- 4,1 External event: Claudius takes action.
Internal event: Claudius fortifies himself against Hamlet's *idealism*.
- 4,2 External event: Rosencrantz and Rosencrantz capture Hamlet.
Internal event: Hamlet mocks the *cynicism* of Rosencrantz and Rosencrantz.
- 4,3 External event: Claudius sends Hamlet to England.
Internal event: *Idealistic* Hamlet ridicules *cynical* Claudius.
- 4,4 External event: Hamlet crosses paths with Fortinbras.
Internal event: Hamlet compares his *idealism* with that of Fortinbras.
- 4,5 External event: Laertes returns to Elsinore and witnesses Ophelia's insanity.
Internal event: Laertes' gullible *idealism* and Ophelia's naïve *idealism*.
- 4,6 External event: Horatio learns Hamlet has returned.
Internal event: Horatio fears Hamlet has given up his *idealism*.
- 4,7 External event: Claudius and Laertes conspire to murder Hamlet.
Internal event: Claudius *cynically* manipulates Laertes' trustful *idealism*.
- 5,1 External event: Hamlet learns of Ophelia's death.
Internal event: Hamlet realizes his *idealism* has resulted in Ophelia's suicide.
- 5,2 External event: Hamlet agrees to a sporting duel with Laertes.
Internal event: Hamlet comes to terms with his obsessive *idealism*.
- 5,3 External event: Hamlet slays Claudius.
Internal event: Hamlet's newly compassionate *idealism* is tested.

The chain of internal events confirms that idealism is a functioning seed for *Hamlet*. Forcing the seed to reveal its inward connecting role in each external event makes it possible to act, direct, and design a play according to the inherent unity of *all* its parts as against a collection of literary subjects.

5. *Three Major Climaxes*

The three major climaxes mark out the beginning, middle, and end of the play, each one expressing the essence of the section it represents. Regardless of complexity, simplicity, or style, every play goes through three stages in which it emerges (beginning), develops (middle), and concludes (end). By imagining the beginning, middle, and end smoothly changing from one into another, actors, directors, and designers can follow the primary “arc” (development) of the play without getting lost in the details.

Reviewing the facts in *Hamlet* will help to identify its three major climaxes and the sections of the play they represent. While Hamlet remains unaware of his father’s murder, he does not yet feel the need for decisive action. He needs a stronger motive if he is to do more than mourn his father’s death, scowl at his uncle’s indifference, and lament his mother’s faithlessness. This motive arises in 1,5 when the Ghost reveals the precise circumstances of his murder. It’s one thing for Claudius and Gertrude to show indifference to King Hamlet’s death, but it is another thing altogether to have murdered him. The Ghost-King informs Hamlet of this event, using shock tactics to incite Hamlet into taking concrete action. “Remember me!” the Ghost cries out.

Here is the first major climax, which critics also call the inciting action since it incites the protagonist to take action. With perhaps too much rhetoric, Hamlet swears to give up mourning and moralizing, and devote himself to avenging his father’s murder. This climax is the essence of the beginning section of the play, which begins with the first appearance of the Ghost (1,1) and ends with Hamlet’s one and only encounter with Ophelia (3,1). The events in this section—let’s call it “Hamlet investigates the facts”—are a powerful wake-up call for Hamlet’s idealism, even as Ophelia’s seeming duplicity is a powerful signal for him to quit investigating and take action.

Events begin to accelerate toward the second major climax when the Players arrive. Hamlet is stirred by the First Player’s passionate recital of a passage from Homer’s *Iliad* and reminded of the Trojan horse “mousetrap” used by the Greeks. Accordingly, he plans a risky mousetrap of his own through the performance of a play intended

to expose Claudius. His next scene with the Players is the so-called “Mousetrap Scene,” where the Players enact “The Murder of Gonzago,” exposing Claudius’s treachery. Here is the second major climax, a crucial turning point in the action since it shows the apparent victory of Hamlet’s idealistic search for the truth. This climax is the essence of the middle section of the play, which starts with the arrival of the Players (3,2) and concludes when “Hamlet’s encounters Fortinbras” (4,4). We might call the middle section “Hamlet plans a trap.”

There is little doubt the third major climax is 5,2, where all the competing forces of the story clash with each other. Four deaths, the collapse of the monarchy, three family dynasties shattered, and a regime change would be a climactic event under any circumstances. This climax is the essence of the end section of the play, which starts with Hamlet’s return to Elsinore (4,5) and concludes with the so-called “duel” scene (5,2). This section might be called, “Hamlet lets things happen.”

A recap of the three major climaxes looks something like the following. Notice each climax also marks a significant stage in the development of Hamlet’s idealism, effectively the development of his conscience:

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- Beginning (1,1–3,1): Hamlet investigates the facts.
 - First major climax of the play: Hamlet promises revenge.
- Middle (3,2–4,4): Hamlet plans a trap.
 - Second major climax of the play: Hamlet exposes Claudius.
- End section (4,5–5,2): Hamlet looks anew at himself.
 - Third major climax of the play: Hamlet is murdered even as he slays Claudius.

Study of the three major climaxes and their associated sections of the play shows that *Hamlet* shares the same progressive beginning-middle-end development as that of all effective plays.

Awareness of the play’s developing structure is called “perspective,” meaning the accurate correlation of the events of a play in performance. Perspective, Stanislavsky said, is necessary

so that, at any given moment, we keep thinking about the future [outcome of the play], that we marshal our inner creative forces and outer means of expression, so that we can properly order them and see the value of the raw material [we have accumulated] with some intelligence.

(Stanislavsky, 2008: 461)

Likewise, actor-teacher Michael Chekhov taught “the law of triplicity” (beginning, middle, end) to help actors to envision the basic emotional outline of the play without being caught up in its particulars.

6. Theme

Like the seed, the theme passes through the entire play, an attribute that makes its definition possible here: **The theme represents the outcome of the seed, typically the opposite value of the hero’s character flaw.** Let’s return to *Hamlet* to explain.

Seeing as idealism could be a valid seed for many plays besides *Hamlet* (for example, *Oedipus Rex*, *The Wild Duck*, *Machinal*, *Top Girls*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, and more), what is distinctive about the outcome of idealism in *Hamlet*? A review of the facts shows that *Hamlet* begins in a state of emotional agitation, which is worsened by an over-heated sense of right and wrong. His awkward and self-destructive progress from no-holds-barred idealism toward a more compassionate view of life comprises the primary action of the play. If the theme is an opposite value of idealism, then the theme of *Hamlet* could be expressed, if only for learning purposes, as *the costs of idealism*; that is, the unintended consequences of an idealism that obstructs the ability to see things as they are and judge them well. The energy that *Hamlet* expends in the service of what he idealistically believes to be his duty leads to a hardening of his heart toward everything outside that duty.

While *Hamlet*’s obsessive idealism is the ideological core of the play, the other characters may be seen as ideological radials, so to speak, spreading out from *Hamlet* each according to their perspective on idealism. Claudius is a cynic (idealism is impractical) who evaluates everything exclusively by its success or failure in real life. Laertes and perhaps Gertrude are gullible idealists. Ophelia is a naïve idealist. Horatio is a compassionate idealist. Fortinbras is a shrewd idealist. The Players are artistic idealists. Even the Gravedigger has his part—as the wise idealist.

The point is that *Hamlet*’s obsessive idealism has proven to be cold-hearted and deadly. He confesses this to Horatio (see 5,2) as he begins to consider a more compassionate viewpoint. In any case, this is the prevalent view of the play. Alternatively, some critics and directors interpret Shakespeare as a modernist expressing the same kind of darkly ironic sensibility as that found, for example, in the absurdist plays of Samuel Becket. This interpretation may have the same seed as our model *Hamlet*—idealism, aiming for perfection—however, it expresses a wholly different theme: senseless idealism. According to

this theme, idealism is a cruel hoax foisted on a gullible Hamlet (perhaps the fate of Laertes in our model). This interpretation may not be widely held, yet it deserves attention because it originates from facts from the play itself, not laid on externally or after the fact. Shared seeds with opposing themes show that the purpose of play analysis is not to obtain a single definitive interpretation of a play but so far as possible an accurate and consistent one.

7. *Super-Objective*

The theme is a summary statement of the play's meaning. However, it remains just that—a fixed intellectual summary. In performance, however, the theme needs to reveal itself through the actions the characters perform over time. The super-objective is a concept that embraces the theme, but also returns a sense of action and forward motion to the play. **The super-objective is the protagonist's all-inclusive goal; it is the theme expressed as what the main character is striving to accomplish.** Sometimes it is said that the super-objective originates from the play itself instead of from the protagonist, but this is a distinction without a difference. By its very nature, the principal meaning of a play is embodied in its protagonist. Supporting characters also have their super-objectives (all-inclusive goals), but in Action Analysis, they are less crucial at this point because they are always thematically subordinate to that of the protagonist.

Hamlet's super-objective is "to put things right," or put another way, "to find out why things have gone wrong." He says so himself in the text: "O cursed spite/That ever I was born to set it right!" (1,5,215–216). Hamlet seeks to determine why the world does not work according to his ideals, and he wants to change the world to make it do so.

Reviewing the facts confirms that Hamlet is setting things right throughout the play. He sets things right by rashly promising to carry out the Ghost's demands; by frankly rebuking the hypocrisy of Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Ophelia, and Gertrude; and above all by pitilessly exposing Claudius's machinations in the "mousetrap scene." Hamlet's obsessive idealism drives him to imagine that with enough effort he can set everything right merely by revealing it as wrong. Instead, to his dismay, each push of his to set things right exposes even more deceit, lust, corruption, apathy, sycophancy, intrigue, and stupidity. Hamlet faces an impossible amount of lies and hypocrisy to set right. However, this does not deter him from his super-objective, at least until the very end, when he begins

to recognize the unexpected outcomes of his obsession. A further review of the facts shows the relationship of Hamlet's super-objective to that of the other characters in the play. All of them seek to set things right as well, though for different reasons, in different ways, and certainly with different outcomes.

8. *Through-Action*

At this point, Action Analysis seeks to understand *Hamlet* as a complete story once again, a concise report of a specific character continually performing a particular action within specific circumstances. The seed, three major climaxes, theme, and super-objective are useful formulations up to a point. Helpful as they are, they are still mental concepts. For play production, concepts need to be translated from the abstract to the concrete, from the realm of ideas into the field of human behavior. The through-action—sometimes called the through-line of action or unbroken line—fulfills this task. **The through-action is a description of what the protagonist continually does to the antagonist to achieve his/her super-objective.** Notice the through-action does not include the super-objective but only expresses the action used to achieve it. Why? The through-action takes place in the actual present, whereas the super-objective lies ahead in the abstract future. Incidentally, the through-action is also an essential concept in film and television where it is called the premise or logline.

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Let's review the facts again here, except thanks to the previous steps of Action Analysis we now have a more wide-ranging grasp of the play. **Who** is Hamlet? Young, obsessively idealistic, devoted to art, philosophy, theology, and poetry. **What** is he doing? Searching for dishonesty and trying to wipe it out. **Where** is he doing it? The corrupt royal court of Denmark. **When** is he doing it? At a turbulent time when war threatens Denmark from abroad, and his cynical uncle has taken over the throne by treachery and deceit. **How** does he do it? At times sensitive and unfeeling, elegant and clumsy, impulsive and brooding, anguished and happy, graceful and graceless, tender and violent. **Why** is he doing it? His exacting conscience compels him to do it, and his father, to whom he is devoted, has ordered him to do it. His task is both a moral and a royal duty. **For what purpose** is he doing it? To get at the truth amid all the lies.

Reviewing the facts leads to the through-action, a one-sentence explanation of what happens in the play: *An obsessively idealistic prince exposes a criminal usurper.* Notice the one-sentence arrangement:

subject (Hamlet), pro-active action (exposes), and object (criminal usurper). This single sentence contains all the parts of Action Analysis in latent form. It suggests but does not necessarily verbalize Hamlet's super-objective, only the behavioral action he uses to accomplish it—to provoke (stimulate a reaction). It indicates that Hamlet could do much damage with his provocations, not only to himself but also to others (including his lover) and his country. From this single sentence, one can also work out the seed, theme, super-objective, and even hints of the three major climaxes.

Furthermore, the through-action sentence preserves the tragic tone of the play. Not everyone will agree with this formulation, but its purpose and the working process behind it are laid out in any case: protagonist + pro-active action + object. Adding the risks involved (preparations for war, remarriage of the former queen to her former brother-in-law, the cooperation of the political leaders and their hangers-on) could help to strengthen this formulation of the through-action.

The through-action is a challenging concept. Condensing ninety pages of play into one sentence and filling it with the power to summarize and attract is surprisingly hard to do. It is difficult to develop an effective through-action when each part of a play requires so much individualized attention. Extracting the crucial elements and omitting everything else seems like doing the play an injustice. Then again, an effective through-action is vital to an accurate understanding of the play. As a concise summing up of what the story is about, it is something to keep in mind, especially throughout the general disorder and confusion of the rehearsal period.

9. *Counter Through-Action*

As often happens in life, every action in a play meets with a counter-action, which destroys, challenges, strengthens, or transforms it. As the name suggests, **the counter through-action is a description of what the antagonist continually does to the protagonist to achieve his/her super-objective.** The counter through-action creates the play's central conflict, without which there is no play in the accepted sense because there is no central conflict.

Again, review the facts. **Who** is Claudius? Denmark's new king, brother and assassin of the recent king, uncle to the heir-apparent prince, and new husband of his brother's widow. **What** is he doing? Strengthening and protecting his tenuous position. **Where** is he doing it? In a palace in feudal Denmark threatened by war. **When** is he

doing it? Shortly following the mysterious death of the former king (a legendary conqueror), and during a time of political tension with neighboring Norway. **How** does he do it? By alternately threatening and appeasing the fears of court insiders. **Why** does he do it? For power and the former king's wife. **For what purpose** is he doing it? To protect his tenuous position. This review of the facts leads to the following counter through-action: *A strong-minded new king conspires against a naïve and hyper-sensitive prince and rightful heir.* Notice the attention to Claudius's ethics in this through-action sentence, an ethics of power that both challenges Hamlet's idealism and ultimately transforms it. Once more, this definition is not meant to be authoritative, but merely an object lesson about the process used to determine the counter through-action.

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This chapter completes the study of Action Analysis. The next chapters describe formalist play analysis, which starts by analyzing plays from the very beginning—"returning to the foot of the mountain," so to speak—building fact upon fact in search of a vision of the whole play once again, though by a different route. Action Analysis is not a prerequisite for Formalist Analysis. However, if Action Analysis takes place before the formalist process, it can provide a "base station" for the more wide-ranging formalist method. Both approaches are formalist in that they acknowledge the significance of form (the arrangement of parts) in a play and rely on information in the play itself sooner than outside sources. Both methods together are close to a rounded whole.

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Summary

Action Analysis is a specially reduced type of Formalist Analysis based primarily on the events in the plot. **Events** are turning points in the course of the stage action that change the behavior of all who are present. **External events** are social exchanges that change the behavior of everyone present. **Reviewing the facts** means trying to understand the reasons and motives behind the facts and events of the play by asking who, what, where, when, why, how, and what for. The **seed** of the play is its main emotional and conflictful essence and the source of the author's perspective. **Internal events** connect the external events firmly to the seed, making all the events work

together toward a single core of meaning. The **three major climaxes** mark out the beginning, middle, and end sections of the play, each one expressing the essence of the section it represents. The **theme** represents the outcome of the seed, typically the opposite value of the hero's character flaw. The **super-objective** is the protagonist's all-inclusive goal; it is the theme expressed as what the main character is striving to accomplish. The **through-action** is a description of what the protagonist continually does to the antagonist to achieve his/her super-objective. The **counter through-action** is a description of what the antagonist regularly does to the protagonist to accomplish his/her super-objective.

Exercises for a Scene or Short Play

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1. **Chain of external events.** What are the external events, those social exchanges that change characters most? How are they arranged in order? Descriptions should be short and snappy, without resorting to abstract or literary words. What do the external events require from or suggest about the physical production?
2. **Reviewing the facts.** Who are the most important characters in each external event? What are they doing in practical terms of behavior? Where are they doing it, in what physical environment? When are they doing it? Why are they doing it? How are they doing it, in what manner emotionally? For what purpose are they doing it? Again, the responses should be short and snappy, not bookish. What elements of the physical production are required or suggested by reviewing the facts?
3. **Seed.** What is the main character flaw of the protagonist, the specific trait that leads to the success or failure of his/her super-objective? Explain how this character flaw becomes the seed by its influence on all the events and characters in the play. Explain how this seed is the philosophical, social, and artistic impulse behind the play. A few words, or even one word, will usually be enough to describe the seed. (The seed is an extremely important concept, but it can be difficult to accept and deal with in a determined way. Stick-to-itiveness will pay off in the end.) What does the seed require from or suggest about the physical production?
4. **Chain of internal events.** Look for a direct connection between the seed and each external event. Be short and snappy, always stating the seed itself in the formulation. What elements of the physical production are required or suggested by the internal events?

5. **Three major climaxes.** What are the three major climaxes (the three events of highest dramatic tension or emotional temperature; the three major turning points in the action; the essences of the beginning, middle, and end)? What sorts of mental associations come to mind for each climax?
6. **Theme.** What is the ultimate fate of the protagonist? Is this fate an opposite value of the seed? How may this fate be considered the basis of the theme? How do the three major climaxes show the progressive development of this theme, in terms of its beginning, middle, and end? What does the theme require from or suggest about the physical production?
7. **Super-objective.** What is the overall goal the protagonist is striving to accomplish? How is it illustrated in the unfolding action of the play? What does the protagonist's super-objective require from or suggest about the physical production?
8. **Through-action.** What is the protagonist continually doing to the antagonist to achieve his/her super-objective? In one sentence, formulate the result as a specific character (subject) consistently carrying out (pro-active action) toward a particular antagonist (object). How are the seed, theme, and super-objective implied in this through-action? What does the through-action require from or suggest about the physical production?
9. **Counter through-action.** What is the antagonist continually doing to the protagonist to achieve his/her super-objective? In one sentence, formulate the result as a specific character performing a specific continual action under specific circumstances. How are the seed, theme, and super-objective implied in this counter through-action? What does the through-action require from or suggest about the physical production?

Foundations of the Plot

Given Circumstances

22

This chapter begins the process of formalist script analysis, which involves studying the primary structural elements of a play and determining the likeliest dramatic potentials from observations about them. In his treatise, *Poetics*, Aristotle (384–322 BCE) identified and prioritized a play's primary structural elements as plot, character, language (dialogue), theme (idea), music (tempo-rhythm-mood), and spectacle (physical production). Some of Aristotle's original terms are rephrased here for usage in today's theatre. In any case, there are six primary structural elements, yet Aristotle did not mean that every play possesses every element in the same proportion. He simply meant that all these elements are present *in one way or another* in all those works we call plays. Today the same features are still considered essential for successful stage plays, teleplays, and screenplays.

Since Aristotle considered plot as the first and most crucial element, we will follow his example and commence with the study of plot. Now plot has both static and dynamic features. The static features include the total set of present and past conditions in which the action takes place. The dynamic features include all the events that move the action forward. This chapter studies the present conditions, termed given circumstances. The next chapter studies the past conditions, termed background story. The dynamic features of the plot will be studied further ahead.

Given Circumstances

Given circumstances denote the entire set of conditions in which the play takes place. Other terms that express the same thing are

social context, playwright's setting, texture, local detail, and literary landscape. Inexperienced play readers tend to regard given circumstances as the trivial, uninteresting things they can quickly pass over. The impulse may be counterproductive, but it acknowledges something important. On the surface, given circumstances may not seem as exciting or worthwhile as the other parts of a play, such as plot or characters. Indeed, the given circumstances are simple things, so simple the impulse is to take them for granted—like the air we breathe—which is why they are so difficult to recognize as essential. How so? First, it is the given circumstances that place the characters in the “here and now” of the play. Without this frame of reference, the characters would exist in an abstract world deprived of any connections to life as we live it. Second, the given circumstances form a foundation for the plot by surrounding the play with unobvious psycho-physical forces. Third, the given circumstances always contain crucial information about other parts of the play. The type of analysis explained in this chapter makes each of the given circumstances stand up and identify itself, the better to understand both its substance and its specific contribution to the artistic harmony of the play.

Given circumstances take place in the present, on stage, before the audience. They stem from the time and place of the action along with the conventions, attitudes, and manners behind and around it. Within this category are seven topics: time, place, society, economics, culture, politics and law, and spirituality, all creating the special world of the play, which is their common outcome. The next chapter considers the background story—the given circumstances of the past, so to speak—which tells of the action that occurred before the play begins.

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Time

Time in the given circumstances has three aspects: (1) the time of the play's writing, (2) the time in which the action occurs, and (3) the time that passes during the play's action.

Time of the Play's Writing

The time of the play's writing refers to the era in which the author wrote the play. Although knowledge of the author's life, works, and world is essential for performance and production, at the moment this information is temporarily disregarded since it is not explicitly part of the written play. Too much attention to external details at this

early point could distract from what is present in the play. It is better to set aside external issues of this kind until the process of script analysis is further along.

Time of the Action

The time of the action refers to the clock time, calendar time, season, year, and era in which the play takes place. Knowledge of this information is not for the sake of realism or bookish accuracy but for awareness of the entirety of the psycho-physical circumstances. For instance, in *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman reminisces about the boxer Gene Tunney and the football player Red Grange. These athletes established the year of those recollections at about 1927 when Tunney was heavyweight champion, and Grange played football for the Chicago Bears. Two years later the stock market crashed, ushering in the Great Depression—a crucial period for a play that questions the so-called American Dream. The last days of Roy Cohn, the archconservative lawyer in *Angels in America*, establish this play's action in 1986 when the United States Attorney General published the first official report about the AIDS epidemic. That year was also the beginning of Ronald Reagan's second term as president, which many considered a sign of the decline of American liberalism. The year 1986, therefore, can be understood as the end of an era in this play about the effects of beginnings and endings.

Gene Tunney, the Great Depression, Roy Cohn, and public awareness of the AIDS epidemic are essential in these plays not only because they help to establish the historical context but also because they reinforce conflicts among the characters and inform the physical production. Stage directions and playwrights' notes offer additional information about the time of the action, but they may not be as influential as time information stated in the dialogue. Stage directions and extra notes are only a record of the first professional production of the play. Actors, directors, and designers working toward a genuinely unique production usually suspend study of stage directions until settling on their analyses first.

Dramatic Time

Dramatic time refers to the time that passes during the stage action, including intervals between entrances and exits, and acts and scenes. Some plays permit an exact account. In *The Wild Duck*, it is possible, without the help of stage directions, to identify the passage

of dramatic time almost to the hour, including the time of day and day of the week for each act. Dramatic time can also be compressed or expanded to accommodate dramatic needs. For example, several days pass in *The Piano Lesson*, months in *Hamlet*, and years in *Three Sisters* and *Mother Courage*. Time moves forward and backward in *Death of a Salesman* and stands still in *Happy Days*. In *A Lie of the Mind*, time jumps around in seemingly random leaps.

An instructive assortment of information about time appears in this passage from Act 2 of Ibsen's play, *The Wild Duck*.

(A knocking is heard at the entrance door.)
GINA. (rising) Hush, Ekdal—I think there's someone at the door.
HJALMAR. (laying his flute on the bookcases) There! Again!
(Gina goes and opens the door.)
GREGERS. (in the passage) Excuse me —
GINA. (starting back slightly) Oh!
GREGERS. Doesn't Mr. Ekdal, the photographer, live here?
GINA. Yes, he does.
HJALMAR. (going toward the door) Gregers! You here after all? Well, come in then.
GREGERS. (coming in) I told you I would come and look you up.
HJALMAR. But this evening—Have you left the party?
GREGERS. I have left the party and my father's. Good evening, Mrs. Ekdal. I don't know whether you recognize me?
GINA. Oh, yes, it's not difficult to know young Mr. Werle again.
GREGERS. No, I am like my mother, and no doubt you remember her.
HJALMAR. Left your father's house, did you say?
GREGERS. Yes, I have gone to a hotel.
HJALMAR. Indeed. Well, since you're here, take off your coat and sit down.
GREGERS. Thanks. (He takes off his overcoat.)

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Gregers' statement, "I told you I would come and look you up," refers to something he said to Hjalmar at the dinner party, which occurred

earlier the same evening. The time reference at this point is not just a way of maintaining story continuity by connecting this scene with a prior incident in the play but also indicates that Gregers has arrived at Hjalmar's house soon after arguing with his (Gregers') father and then checking in to a hotel. How long would it take Gregers to travel across town from Werle's upper-class home to a hotel and then to Ekdal's lower-class apartment? Why and in what manner did Hjalmar make this cross-town visit?

"But this evening—Have you left the party?" and Gregers' responses, "I have left the party" and "Good evening, Mrs. Ekdal," reinforce the continuity of time and confirm the time of the current scene. More importantly, they underscore Hjalmar's surprise at Gregers' unexpected late-night appearance in addition to revealing that Gregers and Gina Ekdal already know each other from an earlier time. How could we learn this from the acting and physical production?

We also see that Gregers is wearing an overcoat because it is winter. The season is important enough for Ibsen to remind us about it again in the accompanying stage directions, which we know he wrote himself (he was a director before becoming a playwright). The point is that the environment is cold, that Gregers is a surprising and unwelcome late-night visitor, and, besides that, he is more than a stranger.

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Place

Place refers to the general and specific location of the stage action. Scenery can illustrate the play's location realistically, illustrate the play's inner spirit, or combine both functions simultaneously. Formalist Analysis does not argue for or against any of these viewpoints. What is important is that the physical location in any configuration not only specifies the time, place, and atmosphere of the action but also intensifies the performance through storytelling stage compositions, tempo and rhythm in the blocking, color and focus in the lighting, picturizing and gesturing through hand properties, and more.

General Locale

The general locale is the neighborhood, district, city, region, and country in which the action takes place. Emotional associations evoked by the general locale contribute to the central meaning of

the play. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Mama Younger announces she has made a down payment on a new home. Her family has been living in the low-income Cabrini Green apartments on Chicago's south side, a socioeconomically stressful environment. At first, they are excited about the prospect of a home of their own in the suburbs. Then anxiety surfaces when she names their future neighborhood, which everyone knows to be a white enclave. What does a "home" look and feel like in the Cabrini Green apartments on the south side of Chicago as compared to one in the Chicago suburbs? What would it mean for this family to have separate bedrooms for the parents and children? What are the psychological and aesthetic associations of a backyard in this play and *Death of a Salesman*? Why does Mama point out the significance of a home to Walter Lee? Does Mama grasp how the Younger family might be treated by the community already settled in Clybourne Park? General locales evoke psycho-aesthetic associations beyond those of realism and authenticity.

Specific Locale

The specific locale denotes the particular spaces in which the stage action takes place. Specific indoor areas include living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens, porches, basements, and so forth. Specific urban areas include parks and public monuments, streets, plazas, and private buildings, farms, mountains, forests, harbors, seashores, and so on. A reader's first impulse might be to rely on stage directions for this information since published scripts include notes about and sometimes diagrams of the scenery and ground plans; for example, the detailed description of Doaker Charles's kitchen and parlor in *The Piano Lesson* and the even more detailed description of the transparent multi-level Loman house in *Death of a Salesman*. Publishers' notes and diagrams like these can be useful, but they are only the stage manager's description of the first professional production. The original scenery and ground plan might be satisfactory for reading purposes, but they are a matter of serious interest for designers and directors seeking their interpretation. Since today's theatre calls for a distinctive physical production for each newly produced play, notes about earlier productions are not an automatic guide.

As always, the dialogue is the best and most productive source of information. Statements like, "So this is your quarters, Hjalmar—this is your home" in *The Wild Duck* and "Lord, ain't nothing so dreary as the view from this window on a dreary day, is there?" in *A Raisin*

in the Sun are direct references about the specific locales of those plays. They identify, but, more importantly, they emotionalize. In Chekhov's play, *Three Sisters*, members of the Prozorov family are displaced from drawing room to bedroom to garden, psychologically "evicted" by sister-in-law Natasha. The sense of physical displacement is central to the play's meaning.

Specific locale can also reveal itself indirectly. In this passage from Richard Sheridan's play, *The School for Scandal*, Charles Surface is about to sell a collection of family portraits to pay his debts. He points to the paintings in the portrait gallery of the eighteenth-century house where the auction takes place.

(Enter CHARLES SURFACE, SIR OLIVER SURFACE,
MOSES, and CARELESS.)

CHARLES SURFACE. Walk in, gentlemen, pray walk in—here they are, the family of the Surfaces up to the [Norman] Conquest.

SIR OLIVER (*disguised as* MASTER PREMIUM). And, in my opinion, a goodly collection.

CHARLES SURFACE. Ay, ay, these are done in the true spirit of portrait painting; no *volontère* grace or expression. Not like the works of your modern Raphaels, who give you the strongest resemblance, yet contrive to make your portrait independent of you; so that you may sink the original and not hurt the picture. No, no; the merit of these is the inveterate likeness—all stiff and awkward as the originals, and like nothing in human nature besides.

SIR OLIVER. Ah! We shall never see such figures of men again.

CHARLES SURFACE. I hope not. Well, you see, Master Premium, what a domestic character I am; here I sit of an evening surrounded by my family.

When Charles says, "Walk in, gentlemen, pray walk in," we imagine him entering a large picture gallery and inviting the others to follow. When he says, "Here they are, the family of the Surfaces up to the [Norman] Conquest," he points to each of the portraits. His sarcastic description of the paintings ("the merit of these is the inveterate

likeness—all stiff and awkward as the originals, and like nothing in human nature besides.”) is a clue to the style of the paintings as well as to Charles’ dismissive opinion of his highborn ancestors. His anti-elitist attitude reinforces the play’s egalitarian implications and counterpoints the aristocratic paintings.

Society

Society refers to the closed social system of the play. In the lexicon of science, a “closed system” is an assembly of objects isolated from the outside environment. Plays show social groups living together under such closed systems—closed because the playwright has separated the special world of the play from the objective real world in which we live.

Playwright Arthur Miller believed that the choice of a social group influences the dramatic form of the play. Communication among family members is different from that among strangers, he said, and private behavior is different from public. Interest in the family leads to writing well-ordered realistic plays that can deal with personal and private matters, he said, while investment in social groups outside the family leads to more flexible dramatic forms that can treat wide-ranging public issues. Miller’s observations are intriguing, but they should not be applied too rigidly. The implications resulting from the choice of social groups are numerous and complex, and there are some prominent contrary examples. In any case, his observations underscore how the selection of social groups, the meaning, and the environment of the play are interrelated.

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Family

Family refers to a group of persons of common ancestry. Families are the primary closed social system because we are all sons, daughters, sisters, and brothers before we are anyone else. Families are also the central group in many if not most modern plays. Families have inherent emotional relationships, such as love or hate between husband and wife, pressures or loyalties between parents and their children, and competition or allegiances among siblings.

The garden scene from *Death of a Salesman* alluded to in the Introduction mentions seven family members: Willy’s father, Willy as a father, Willy’s wife, Willy’s sons Biff and Happy, Willy’s brother Ben, and Ben as the uncle of Biff and Happy. Almost every member of

the Loman family and their emotional relationship with each other comes out in this scene. How often and how precisely are family members identified in other family-centered plays?

The intricate family relationships in *The Piano Lesson* have a lineage going back to slavery times. This special bond exerts a controlling influence on the characters and opens a window into the meaning, or "lesson," of the play: those who ignore their heritage risk losing their identities as free and independent human beings.

Families characterize such dissimilar plays as *Oedipus Rex*, *Tartuffe*, *The Lower Depths*, *Three Sisters*, *A Lie of the Mind*, *Mother Courage*, and *Angels in America*. Such a wide range of examples indicates that family relations serve as a fruitful source of conflict in many, many plays. What exactly is the difference between family relations and relations outside the family?

Love and Friendship

Love denotes intense feelings of deep affection. Apart from the family unit, love and friendship are probably the most complicated and scrutinized social relationships in plays. Numerous examples of love appear in the study plays: Oedipus and Jocasta, Hamlet and Ophelia, Tartuffe and Elmire, Mrs. Sorby and Mr. Werle in *The Wild Duck*, Vaska and Natasha in *The Lower Depths*, Mother Courage and the Chaplain, Winnie and Willie in *Happy Days*, Louis Ironson and Prior Walter in *Angels in America*, Berniece and Avery in *The Piano Lesson*, and Jake and Beth in *A Lie of the Mind*, to name a few prominent examples. Note that each of these examples offers a distinctive type of nurturing, manipulative, or damaging love relationship.

Friendships are sympathetic social bonds outside the family. A significant example appears in David Mamet's play, *American Buffalo*, where friendship among a group of petty criminals forms the boundaries of the play's closed social system. Distinctive types of friendship also exist between Hamlet and Horatio (college friends); Gregers Werle and Hjalmar Ekdal in *The Wild Duck* (childhood friends); Satine and the Actor in *The Lower Depths* (fellow dreamer-sufferers), Walter, Willy, and Bobo in *A Raisin in the Sun* (close friends); Willy and Charley in *Death of a Salesman* (mentor-mentee friends); and Roy Cohn and Louis Ironson in *Angels in America* (bully-victim). As is true of family relationships, friendships point to emotional and behavioral expectations that are affirmed or more often tested or disproved in a play.

Occupation

Occupation refers to what the characters do to earn a living and their interactions with others having the same or different professions. Office workers and people in business comprise the central trades in *Death of a Salesman* and *Machinal*, just as professional soldiers do in *Mother Courage* and *Three Sisters*. Actors, soldiers, courtiers, and gravediggers appear in *Hamlet*; locksmiths, hatmakers, actors, pimps, prostitutes, police officers, and slumlords in *The Lower Depths*; process servers in *Tartuffe*; and moneylenders in *The School for Scandal*. Selection of and attitudes toward occupations suggest emotional values and reinforce the central meaning of the play. For example, why does *Angels in America* focus on lawyers, doctors, clerics, doctors, nurses, and other professional figures? Why the educated upper-class in *Three Sisters*?

Social Status

Social status refers to the position a character holds in the social hierarchy of the play. Status differences stem from wealth, power, education, or other material issues. High social status appears in characters or groups that give orders and are accustomed to having them carried out by those of lower social status. Characters of lower social status tend to show deference to those of higher status by using formal titles and submissive behavior, such as bows, curtsies, salutes, and so forth. We observe social status at work in *Hamlet*, when Claudius and Gertrude address Hamlet by his given name, while all others, including Ophelia and Horatio, say "Prince Hamlet" or "my lord." *The School for Scandal* is explicitly about social status distinctions. Sir Peter Teazle, Sir Oliver Surface, Sir Benjamin Backbite, Lady Teazle, and Lady Sneerwell belong to the aristocracy. They are the target of the play's satire, and the untitled characters both depend on and take advantage of their foolish behavior. The characters in *The Lower Depths* seek to maintain the social status of their imagined former lives despite the fact of being social outcasts themselves. Under-expression of the social status distinctions in this play would lead to a serious misreading.

Today social status is typically an outcome of education, financial success, political power, gender identity, ethnicity, and sexual orientation—variable positive and negative distinctions that modern readers readily understand. For example, social status based on money turns up in *The Wild Duck*, *Mother Courage*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Piano Lesson*, and *Three Sisters*; social status based on

education appears in *Three Sisters* and *The Lower Depths*; ethnic discrimination influences the social status of the characters in *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The Piano Lesson*; and social status associated with sexual orientation is a feature of *Angels in America*. Recognizing and illustrating open and hidden evidence of social status is essential for the successful production of these plays.

Social Standards

Social standards are the behaviors and beliefs that characters uphold and are expected to defend. Examples include respect for the individual, prohibitions against dishonesty and disruptive behavior, confidence in working for a living, and being a useful and cooperative member of society. Social standards do not need to be stated or even proven because characters accept them as valid without question. Characters believe in them, and conversely, their behavior and beliefs are conditioned by them. Violations of social standards bring about shock, horror, disgust, anger, ostracism, punishment, and even death to enforce conformity.

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In classic and historical plays, the ethical standards of religion and ancestry tend to govern character behavior—royal power, for example, in *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*, and religious power in *Tartuffe*. Some of these older forms of social control have reversed themselves or changed their reference points. Today, for example, it is the social standards of science and business, the principle of social equality, and the sensitivities of the middle class, television, film, and social media that tend to govern social standards. The controlling influence of social standards may offend those who consider themselves independent-minded; nevertheless, identifying and expressing the social standards in plays are crucial skills for actors, directors, and designers. Frequently the unwritten rules dictated by social standards are the only values the characters take seriously enough to generate stage-worthy conflicts.

Euphemisms (friendly terms that substitute for offensive ones) reveal the presence of social standards through avoidance of unacceptable words or words that point to highly charged social issues. In the first scene of *The Wild Duck*, the servant Jensen points to Mr. Ekdal when he says to the other servant, Petersen, “I’ve heard tell as he’s been a lively customer in his day.” They understand that “lively customer” is a euphemism for adulterer. In the climactic scene at the end of Act 1, Gregers Werle accuses his father of having been “interested in” their former household servant Gina Hansen. In this context, “interested

in" is a euphemism for covert sexual relations. Both Gregers and Mr. Werle resort to euphemisms when referring to the deceased Mrs. Werle. Gregers refers to her "breakdown" and her "unfortunate weakness." Mr. Werle says that she was "morbid" and "overstrained." He also says, "her eyes were—clouded now and then." These are euphemisms for drug addiction, which was as prevalent in the late nineteenth century as it is today, although social standards of that time prohibited speaking about it openly.

Social standards disclose themselves through other kinds of verbal clues, too. When Jensen says earlier, "I've heard tell . . ." it is a hint of alarming gossip about Werle's family. Gossip, of course, stems from the violation, or apparent violation, of accepted social standards. The gossip is confirmed later when Mr. Werle explains to Gregers why he did not provide more assistance to his former business partner, Lieutenant Ekdal. He says, "I've had a slur cast on my reputation [. . .] I have done all I could without positively laying myself open to all sorts of suspicion and gossip." Then, referring to the fact that Mrs. Sorby is living with him at present, he says, "A woman so situated may easily find herself in a false position in the eyes of the world. For that matter, it does a man no good either." Fear of scandal constrains Mr. Werle's behavior because flagrant violation of social standards could ruin his position in business and jeopardize his other social relations. More evidence of veiled social control occurs when Hjalmar confesses he "kept the window blinds down" when Lieutenant Ekdal, his father, was in prison. Euphemisms and other hints in *The Wild Duck* show the existence of stringent social standards regarding marriage, sex, alcohol, drugs, mental health, politics, business affairs, and even relations between labor and management (Gregers was a labor organizer). The reward for conforming to accepted social standards is economic success and social acceptance; the penalty for violation is malicious gossip, public scandal, social ostracism, and even prison.

Words, epithets, euphemisms, and slurs are used to condemn violations of prevailing social standards, and they have the power to inflict serious harm. They can cause shame, embarrassment, and guilt, and they work very efficiently in plays. In 3,2 of *Angels in America, Part Two*, notice the harsh exchange of epithets between Roy Cohn, a Jewish lawyer, and Belize, a gay black hospital worker. The topic is Belize's demand for access to Roy Cohn's unauthorized supply of the scarce and expensive AIDS drug AZT. The provocative epithets they toss at one another reinforce Cohn's precarious position as a powerful lawyer who is both Jewish and a closeted

homosexual and Belize as a gay African-American. Their words are so deliberately provocative that they transcend offensiveness by emphasizing the fact that both characters share a bond that separates them from mainstream society.

Economics

Economics refers to the large-scale monetary system the characters live under and the smaller-scale financial dealings in which they engage. It may seem that economics is far from the formalist principle of focusing on the play itself, but this subject is more critical in plays than it might at first appear. Among the study plays, *Tartuffe*, *The School for Scandal*, *The Wild Duck*, *The Hairy Ape*, *Mother Courage*, *Death of a Salesman*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Three Sisters*, *The Piano Lesson*, *American Buffalo*, and *Angels in America* all share a serious concern with money. Sometimes economic issues appear where we might least expect them. In *The Cherry Orchard*, for example, it is essential to identify information about real estate development, mortgages, banking, borrowing and lending, agricultural marketing, and the daily financial affairs of a large country estate, not to mention the economic impact of the 1861 Russian decree liberating the serfs. Andrey Prozorov's surreptitious mortgaging of the family estate is a significant issue in *Three Sisters*. Gaining or losing money (for the most part, losing it) has been and continues to be one of the favorite dramatic resources for dramatists, particularly American dramatists.

Capitalism (private property, profit, and credit) is the system that most of us are familiar with in daily life and one that we habitually encounter in the plays we read. Since capitalism depends on individual freedom and free enterprise, it can be a rewarding system for successful entrepreneurs, but it can be very hard on those with limited financial talent, influence, or resources. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman struggles to live within a capitalist system dominated by powerful, hard-hearted business interests—everything is sacrificed on the altar of monetary efficiency. His economic concerns involve monthly payments for his refrigerator, automobile, life insurance, and home. Economics is so important in this play that it achieves symbolic status. In the kitchen of Joe Meilziner's famous scenic design, for example, the Hastings refrigerator (always breaking down) is the lone emblematic appliance, and Willy kills himself in a Studebaker, which was a favorite low-priced automobile and

notoriously unreliable—“That goddamn Studebaker,” says Willy, “I just finished paying for the car and it’s on its last legs.” Studebaker went bankrupt in 1933, bounced back, and finally collapsed in 1966. In *Machinal*, the First Man’s revolutionary adventures in Mexico indicate deeply held socialist principles, which contrast with the dehumanizing capitalist environment of the play.

Mercantilism (colonialism with national control of manufacturing and exports) is the economic system found in *The School for Scandal*. Examples are the loans made to Charles Surface based on credit issued to him from the family’s colonial imports, the auction of his family home and furnishings, and the sizable financial resources controlled by his uncle, Sir Oliver Surface. International trading, which plays a significant role in mercantilism, influences the timing of Charles’s loans and the timely arrival of Sir Oliver.

Politics and Law

Politics and law refers to governmental institutions and activities, including the rules of conduct or legislation established by political and legal authorities. In most plays, political and legal conditions rely on the mutual consent of the governed (the characters) for their enforcement. Consequently, the significance of this subject reveals itself through the characters’ attitudes toward political and legal matters. In *Oedipus Rex*, the public oath Oedipus pronounces to track down the murderer of Laius is an example of an indispensable political condition. For him and the population of Thebes, this oath has the force of law. Moreover, everyone accepts Oedipus’s absolute authority without question. There is no need for him to explain or justify this authority, except when he feels someone is challenging it.

Politics is at work in the treaty made between King Hamlet of Denmark and King Fortinbras of Norway, which Horatio discloses in 1,1 of *Hamlet*. Horatio informs his companions that this pact has serious political consequences for both countries. First, the treaty secured Denmark’s political control of Norway; second, young Fortinbras of Norway has raised a military challenge against Claudius to regain his country’s independence; and third, Claudius has responded by placing Denmark on military alert (and murdering King Hamlet, who framed the original pact). The Danish army and its weapons makers are working around the clock to prepare for war. War is in the air, making everyone frightened and tense.

Politics has a significant role in *Angels in America*, too. Roy Cohn is a successful lawyer and political power broker. His plan to influence political decisions at the highest level forms the basis of his relationship with Joe Pitt. Louis Ironson is a political liberal who is very much interested in current politics. Joe Pitt and his family are political conservatives who conform to the political values conspicuous in America in 1986. *Angels in America* is composed of scenes showing the dynamics of these competing political ideologies.

Culture

Culture refers to the arts and other signs of intellectual sensitivity and achievement. Every society has its professional intellectuals, knowledge-workers, and artists, or at least those who spend a large part of their time dealing with intellectual matters. The life of the mind is valued because it can influence the course of life in meaningful ways. Intellectuals and artists, for example, regularly seek to influence political action and advocate for social justice.

36 Signs of culture appear in nonprofessional characters as well. At one end of the cultural spectrum are characters like Hamlet, for example, who appreciates poetry, philosophy, theatre, and the value of the individual. He prefers the life of the mind to the life of action exemplified by Claudius, Fortinbras, and Laertes. At the other end of the spectrum are unschooled characters and those who are indifferent to or scornful of the life of the mind. The characters in *American Buffalo* are uneducated but display a deep respect for real-world criminal wisdom. It is Don's blind respect for the "street smarts" he sees in Teach that leads to his disillusionment at the end. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, necessity obliges Walter Lee Younger to be the family's primary source of income. He resents the academic ambitions of his sister, Beneatha, and her college friend, George Murchison. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman teaches his sons that a winning personality and athletic prowess lead to success. He believes that education is for losers.

On the other hand, formal education does not always go together with wisdom either. Gregers Werle is the most educated character in *The Wild Duck*, yet he is helpless in carrying out even the simplest of chores, such as lighting the stove in his room. He also lacks the kind of compassionate wisdom possessed by Gina, the unschooled former housemaid-paramour of Mr. Werle and present wife of Hjalmar, who is the target of his idealistic imaginings. Compassionate sense also

characterizes uneducated Mama Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun* as well as Boy Willie in *The Piano Lesson*. Anfisa, the servant and former serf in *Three Sisters*, is perhaps the wisest and most well-adjusted character in the play. It is the educated characters who cannot understand what is happening to them—"If only we knew . . .".

Spirituality

Spirituality refers to beliefs in divine, spiritual, or supernatural powers that are obeyed, worshipped, or respected. Spirituality reveals itself through the presence of formal religious faiths, ceremonies, and traditions as well as any informal spiritual values the characters may adopt or support.

Spirituality as a distinctive feature does not appear in *American Buffalo*, *A Lie of the Mind*, or *Death of a Salesman*. Spirituality plays a small but strategic role in *The Wild Duck* through the character of Reverend Molvik, in *The Lower Depths* through the pilgrim Luka, in *Mother Courage* through the Chaplain, and in *Happy Days* through Winnie's repeated prayers. Spirituality is a crucial feature of *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Piano Lesson*, and *Angels in America*. *Oedipus Rex* is entirely driven by a divine curse and response to the world of the oracle. *Hamlet* includes references to religious ceremonies (the religiously unsanctioned burial of Ophelia) and beliefs (King Hamlet died "unhouseled and uneaneled," and Claudius unsuccessfully tries to pray). *Tartuffe* is a critique of an extremist religious movement that was influential in Molière's time.

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The Special World of the Play

The special world of the play is the dramatic environment created by all the given circumstances working together. Each play is literally a new world, so the first thing to do is to study that world as closely as possible, approaching it as something brand new, with no obvious connections to the worlds we already know. Every play has a general world according to its genre of tragedy, comedy, melodrama, or farce, and each play also has a special world of its own. Through their actions and words, the characters reveal the influence the special world has upon them. Figuratively speaking, the characters' existence can be a heaven or a hell, depressing or cheerful, peaceful or disordered, welcoming or unwelcoming, amusing

or frightening, benign or dangerous, lovable or hateful, and everything in between. It all depends on the most important controlling features of the given circumstances.

In *Oedipus Rex*, spiritual forces dominate the special world, a frightening sphere of influence controlled by unpredictable and unforgiving gods who send plagues and famines to punish those who disrespect them. A stern religious-political belief system governs the special world of *Hamlet*. As punishment for his sins (what were they exactly?), King Hamlet inhabits a halfway house between the living and the dead. Moreover, Hamlet must undertake an act of murderous revenge that he is constitutionally unable to accomplish. Thus, for Hamlet, Denmark is a “prison” (2,2,239–247). A religious-political system also controls the special world of *Tartuffe*, where Orgon suffers at the hands of a hypocritical religious extremist. *The Lower Depths* is a special world where comforting dreams offer a makeshift shelter from actual reality. The characters in *The Piano Lesson* live in a special world (albeit nearly real life) controlled by racial oppression and discrimination, in which they strive to live by the spiritual values of their distinct culture.

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The special worlds of modern plays tend to be dominated by social standards, which can often be as cruel and unforgiving as the politics, religions, and deities of old. In *The Wild Duck*, a financial crime committed by a pillar of the community leads to the false imprisonment of Old Ekdal and the social ostracism of his family. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman struggles in a special world of unfeeling, profit-hungry business interests. The selfish and impulsive ideology of petty crooks controls the special world of *American Buffalo*.

Studying the special world of the play also offers an opportunity to acquire an initial sense of the characters and environment. As observed already, the world of the play is formed by the given circumstances that control the characters and their environment. Accordingly, the characters’ relationship to their special world reveals their individual distinctiveness, just as it suggests the distinctiveness of the physical production. Different characters will exhibit different responses to their special world. In fact, their responses delineate their identity. Every character in *Tartuffe*, for example, has a distinctive response to the religious values that dominate their world, and their individual responses in turn determine their behavior. To Orgon religion means extravagant public devoutness. He admires Tartuffe for this characteristic, which he interprets as saintliness. He hopes that Tartuffe will teach him how to achieve peace of mind and

how to stop worrying about what he views as his family's irreligious behavior. According to Orgon, Tartuffe must take the family under control and teach them how to behave faithfully. The other characters express their own points of view toward religion. For Madame Pernelle, it means social status and respectability; Elmire views religion as a private affair of conscience; Dorine considers it a refuge for gossips; for Cleante religion is "pious flummery" (flattery); Marianne sees religion as a tiresome family duty; and for Tartuffe religion is a con game and a means to easy wealth. It is only the King who seems to believe that religion equates with virtuous conduct! Thus, each character expresses a different response to the forces that control the special world of this play.

Given Circumstances in Nonrealistic Plays

Realistic and historical plays are about particular people, places, and events, which is why their given circumstances are governed by plot and character—the human focus of the play. **Nonrealistic plays are about generalized people, places, and events; hence their given circumstances are driven by the intellectual focus of the play.** The essentials of plot and character do not disappear; they are merely handled differently and function differently from their counterparts in historical and realistic plays. Since realistic plausibility is not the primary concern in nonrealistic plays, playwrights are free to create any sorts of given circumstances imaginable, so long as they relate to the play's meaning. The examples below represent the types of given circumstances characteristic of the nonrealistic study plays.

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Atemporal Time

Atemporal time has no relation to a particular time. In nonrealistic plays, time is typically free from the constraints of clock or calendar and thus is not always arranged consecutively. In *Angels in America*, dream-like and hallucinatory episodes (illustrating the inner life of characters) exist outside traditional time and regularly interrupt the expected continuity of the action. *Happy Days* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* take place entirely outside regular time; their special worlds are altogether atemporal. *Top Girls* begins with an atemporal episode where modern characters interact with historical and legendary figures, while in later scenes Marlene's story jumps back and forth from time-specific pasts to time-specific presents.

The overall action in Acts 1, 2, and 3 in *Fefu and Her Friends* is specific and consecutive; however, atemporal time emerges when each of the four scenes of Act 2 are enacted simultaneously in four different locales. Also, Julia experiences atemporal, dream-like visions of her inner life and is even able to transport herself through time and space.

Nonlocalized Place

Nonlocalized place means not assigned to any specific place. In non-realistic plays, place is often treated in an abstract, non-representational manner to draw attention away from the particular toward the universal. Details of place may suggest themselves but do not always appear as they do in real life. A nonlocalized patch of scorched earth identifies the location of *Happy Days*. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* occurs in no identifiable place at all. The so-called ship in Act 2 is nonlocalized, and Stoppard even parodies the stage conventions of a specific, realistic locale to emphasize the fact. At first glance, the setting for *Fefu and Her Friends* appears to be a specific place (Fefu's home), but upon closer inspection, its "tasteful mixture of styles" is conspicuously clean and straightforward and with an atmosphere of something gone wrong, like an Edward Hopper painting. *Mother Courage* takes place in empty, nonlocalized, and generic locales, which could be anywhere or anytime. *Machinal* and *Angels in America* take place in generic urban locales: an office, a hall, a corridor, a hotel, a hospital, an apartment, a park, a bedroom, a restaurant. The locales could be (and sometimes have been) made realistically specific, but this approach would likely compromise the broader meaning of these plays.

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Myth

Myth is a traditional story describing the psychology, customs, and ideals of a society. Nonrealistic plays make regular use of mythic associations in the given circumstances, which introduce a large-scale, collective sense of awareness. Note the following examples of mythic associations in some of the nonrealistic study plays: *Machinal* invokes myths about society and politics: Organization Man (someone who subordinates his personal goals and wishes to the demands of the organization for which he works, and Liberation Movements (freedom movements that arise in individual nations to expel dictatorial powers, often using guerrilla warfare). *Mother Courage* invokes

myths about society and economics: Survival of the Fittest (the idea that social progress results from conflicts in which the fittest or best-adapted individuals or entire societies would prevail), Capitalism (a system characterized by a free market for goods and services and private control of production and consumption), and the Invisible Hand (belief that individuals seeking their economic self-interest benefit society more than they would if they tried to benefit society directly). This listing is not to promote arbitrary “myth hunting.” Myth in nonrealistic plays serves the specific purpose of illustrating particular aspects of the play’s theme, a topic that Chapter 7 explains in more detail as the main idea.

The Theme World of Nonrealistic Plays

Since each play by definition creates a unique special world, its own set of given circumstances, it follows that nonrealistic plays create special worlds too, although the given circumstances governing them are determined more by meaning than by plot or character. In other words, the given circumstances in nonrealistic plays create “theme worlds.” “Theme park” is a term used to describe an amusement park designed to carry a theme throughout the park, and **theme world is the sphere of influence intended to carry a specific theme throughout the play.**

In *Machinal*, economics and social standards create a theme world that enforces mechanization on humanity. War capitalism controls the theme world of *Mother Courage*. In *Happy Days*, distorted social standards generate a theme world of dysfunctional dreams. *The Birthday Party* is a theme world controlled by nameless, menacing power. The lesson for actors, directors, and designers is that given circumstances in nonrealistic plays express themselves primarily through the theme, and any deviations from overt cause-and-effect expectations need to be theatricalized to illustrate the thematically constructed world.

Summary

Given circumstances denote the entire set of conditions in which the play takes place. The **time of the play’s writing** refers to the era in which the author wrote the play. The **time of the action** refers to the clock time, calendar time, season, year, and era in which the play takes place. **Dramatic time** refers to the time that passes during the stage action, including intervals between entrances and exits, and acts and scenes. **Place** refers to the general and specific location

of the stage action. The **general locale** is the neighborhood, district, city, region, and country in which the action takes place. The **specific locale** denotes the particular spaces in which the stage action takes place. **Society** refers to the closed social system of the play. **Family** refers to parents and their children. **Love** denotes intense feelings of deep affection. **Friendships** are sympathetic social bonds outside the family. **Occupation** refers to what the characters do to earn a living and their interactions with others having the same or different professions. **Social status** refers to the position a character holds in the social hierarchy of the play. **Social standards** are the behaviors and beliefs that characters uphold and are expected to defend. **Economics** signifies the large-scale monetary system the characters live under and the smaller-scale financial dealings in which they engage. **Politics and law** refers to governmental institutions and activities, including the rules of conduct or legislation established by political and legal authorities. **Culture** relates to the arts and other signs of intellectual sensitivity and achievement. **Spirituality** refers to beliefs in divine, spiritual, or supernatural powers that are obeyed, worshipped, or respected. The **special world of the play** is the unique sphere of influence collectively formed by the given circumstances. **Nonrealistic plays** are about generalized people, places, and events; hence their given circumstances are driven by theme (the intellectual focus of the play). **Atemporal time** has no relation to a particular time. **Nonlocalized place** means not assigned to a specific place. **Myth** is a traditional story describing the psychology, customs, and ideals of a society. **Theme world** describes a stage environment intended primarily to carry a specific theme throughout the play.

Exercises for a Scene or Short Play

1. **Time.** In what year and season does the action occur? Can the passage of time during the play be determined? The time between the scenes and acts? The hour of the day for each scene? Each act? What do the features of time require from or suggest about the physical production?
2. **Place.** In what country, region, or city does the action occur? Are any geographical features described? In what specific locale does the action occur? What is the particular location for each scene, including the ground plan and other architectural features if possible? What do the features of place require from or suggest about the physical production?

3. **Society.** What are the family relationships? Are they nurturing, manipulating, or damaging? What are the friendships and love relationships? What occupational groups are depicted? What are the social standards, the behavior expectations? Are they spoken about or implied? Are they enforced openly or indirectly? Where and how is social status represented? What social group controls the social standards? What are the rewards for conformity? What are the penalties for violating social standards? What do the features of society require from or suggest about the physical production?
4. **Economics.** What is the primary economic system in the play? Any specific examples of business activities or transactions? Does money exert any particular control over the characters? Who controls the economic circumstances? How do they exert control? What are the rewards for economic success? The penalties for violating the economic standards? What do the features of economics require from or suggest about the physical production?
5. **Politics and law.** What system of government serves as the background or foreground of the play? Any specific examples of political or legal activities, actions, or ceremonies? Do politics or law exercise any control over the characters? Who controls the political and legal circumstances in the play? How do they exert control? What are the rewards for political and legal compliance? The penalties for violating the political and legal standards? What do the features of politics and law require from or suggest about the physical production?
6. **Culture.** Any signs of art or intellectual sensitivity and achievement in the characters? Any characters noticeably more or less educated or creative than others? Does intellect or culture exercise any control over the characters? Who controls the intellectual and artistic circumstances in the play? How do they exert their control? What are the rewards for intellectual and creative activity? What are the penalties for violating intellectual and artistic standards? What do the features of culture require from or suggest about the physical production?
7. **Spirituality.** What is the accepted code of religious or spiritual belief? Any examples of religious or spiritual activities or ceremonies? Does spirituality exercise any control over the characters? Who controls the spiritual circumstances in the play? How do they exert control? What are the rewards for spiritual conformity? What are the penalties for violating the spiritual standards? What

do the features of spirituality require from or suggest about the physical production?

8. **The special world of the play.** Describe the special world of the play, the closed system or unique environment collectively created by the given circumstances. How does the special world of the play influence the conduct and attitude of characters in the play? What are the different points of view expressed by the characters toward their special world? What does the special world of the play require from or suggest about the physical production?
9. **Following Action Analysis.** Search for the presence of the play's seed in the given circumstances. How does the seed affect the given circumstances? Why did the playwright choose these specific given circumstances from the whole range of other possibilities to dramatize the seed? In what way would the use of different given circumstances change the seed and vice versa? In what way does associating the seed with the given circumstances and physical production contribute to the expressiveness of the play?

Foundations of the Plot

Background Story

What Is Background Story?

Now that we have studied the given circumstances of the present, we can turn our attention to the given circumstances of the past. The lives of the characters begin long before they appear on stage, and their pasts are essential for understanding their present and future lives. Every dramatic story has a past, but the conventional time and space features of the theatre call for a particular writing skill to reveal the past while the stage action continues to move forward. The common term for this feature is exposition, but sometimes it is also referred to as previous action or antecedent action. The word exposition comes from the Latin root *exposito*, meaning to put forward or to expose, and it is useful because exposition is a way of exposing the unseen events of the play.

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However, this way of thinking about the past carries unpleasant overtones since it gives the impression the past is a clumsy necessity that obstructs the plot—a severe misunderstanding for actors, directors, and designers. In a play, the past is just as dramatically compelling as the present, not a literary obstacle to overcome; not a mere disclosure of the facts to understand the story, but a sympathetic involvement in that story. After all, for the characters the past is not dry and unexciting, but rather their very lives. In short, background story is an integral part of the play. It not only discloses the past but also conveys information about the characters who are talking about the past as well as those listening and adjusting to them. Background story also generates conflicts, creates moods, and strongly influences the special world of the play.

To be reminded of the dramatic potentials of the past, replace the static term exposition with the more energetic term background story. **Background story denotes everything that happened to the characters before the beginning of the play.** Time and again it is crucial to know what occurred to the characters before their onstage lives. In *Oedipus Rex*, the fate of Jocasta's infant son is a case in point. Did Jocasta bind the infant's feet and hand him over to a household servant with orders to abandon him? Where did the Corinthian Messenger obtain the infant that he gave to King Polybus and Queen Merope? He claims to have received the infant from one of Laius's herdsmen. But why did the herdsman give the baby to him in the first place? Did the infant belong to the herdsman? If not, who gave it to him and why? Is the shepherd the same herdsman who carried the infant to the Corinthian Messenger? What is the purpose behind all this complicated scheming and reluctance to tell the truth? All these questions and many more about the background story are crucial in *Oedipus Rex*.

Knowing the past becomes even more crucial when handled in the subtle manner of Henrik Ibsen in *The Wild Duck*. In the following excerpt from Act 1, Gregers Werle has returned home after a long absence. He has a sharp disagreement with his father about the fate of the Ekdal family, whose patriarch, the elderly Lieutenant Ekdal, used to be a business partner and close friend. However, we should guard against hasty value judgments about the past. The truth should not always depend on the recollections of Gregers, his father, or any other single character. (It's a good idea to get into the habit of highlighting the background story in the script as we do here to distinguish it from the onstage action.)

GREGERS. How has that family been allowed to go so miserably to the wall?

WERLE. You mean the Ekdals, I suppose?

GREGERS. Yes, I mean the Ekdals. Lieutenant Ekdal who was once so closely associated with you?

WERLE. Much too closely; I have felt that to my cost for many a year. It is thanks to him that I—yes I—have had a kind of slur cast upon my reputation.

GREGERS. *(softly)* Are you sure that he alone was to blame?

WERLE. Who else do you suppose?

GREGERS. You and he acted together in that affair of the forests –

WERLE. But was it not Ekdal that drew the map of the tracts we had bought—that fraudulent map! It was he who felled all the timber illegally on government ground. In fact, the whole management was in his hands. I was quite in the dark as to what Lieutenant Ekdal was doing.

GREGERS. Lieutenant Ekdal himself seems to have been very much in the dark about what he was doing.

WERLE. That may be. But the fact is that he was found guilty and I was acquitted.

GREGERS. Yes, I know that nothing was proved against you.

Since the versions of the past offered by these two characters are incompatible or at least incomplete, readers need to form their independent version. Here the characters disagree about the reasons for the decline of the Ekdal family. Gregers blames his father, while Mr. Werle blames Lieutenant Ekdal. Later in the play, Lieutenant Ekdal provides a different version to Hjalmar and Gina, his son and daughter-in-law. Whose version is correct? Who benefits from each version? In such cases, readers need to examine each version of the background story skeptically, as trial lawyers might examine an opposing witness in court.

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Method of Disclosure

Background story tends to reveal itself in three ways:

1. Historically, in extended passages near the beginning of a play,
2. Realistically, in fragments distributed throughout the play,
3. Minimally, in hints and allusions scattered throughout the play.

There is no advantage in craftsmanship or plausibility in any single method. The choice depends on the author's goals and the practical requirements of the play. Playwriting fashions also play a part. All three methods appear in a wide assortment of plays, can be and are used simultaneously, and are capable of revealing the past without interrupting the flow of the action or disturbing the play's plausibility.

1. Historical Method

Historical plays are those written before the emergence of realism around 1865. The historical method refers to background story that emerges mainly in extended passages near the beginning of the play. Note how this works in *Hamlet*. Horatio's speech to Marcellus in 1,1 consists of twenty-nine lines explaining the reasons behind Denmark's preparations for war. In the next scene, Claudius has a speech of thirty-four lines expressing his gratitude to the court for their support during the recent regime change. He also explains his plans for dealing with the political threat posed by Fortinbras of Norway. More background story comes at the end of the scene. In a famous soliloquy of fifty lines, Hamlet reveals his feelings about his father's recent death and his mother's hasty remarriage. In 1,3 Laertes says farewell to Ophelia in a speech of thirty-four lines, while also warning her about Hamlet's perceived intentions. Besides being a warning to Ophelia, his statements to Ophelia are also background story. In 1,4 the Ghost appears again, when, in a discourse of fifty lines in 1,5, he discloses the circumstances of his murder. At this point in the play, the characters have revealed virtually all the background story in five speeches totaling about 200 lines—less than 5 percent of the entire play. Similarly, extended passages in the opening scenes in *Oedipus Rex*, *Tartuffe*, and *The School for Scandal* reveal almost all the background story for those historical plays.

Placing the background story at the beginning of the play has advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, it focuses attention because it collects all the essential facts of the background story together near the start of the play. This practice permits the dramatist to devote the remainder of the play to the development of onstage (present) action, which is a considerable writing and performance benefit. On the other hand, extended narration can be a burden on actors and audiences because of the need to express all the critical background information in crowded passages, while at the same time maintaining psychological plausibility. Audiences must digest most of the background story right away and note who the essential characters are and what they did. Moreover, they must bear all this in mind throughout the action that follows.

2. Realistic Method

A new style of playwriting with a particular focus on background story began to appear in France in the early nineteenth century.

The new style was called realism, its model was the “well-made play,” and its chief architect was the French author Eugene Scribe. Scribe’s plays began to employ the then-novel scientific principle of cause and effect, as he said, to make the “accidental seem necessary.” Thus, time, place, and action in plays, according to Scribe, were expected to operate according to “realistic” (i.e., scientific) rules. Scribe’s plays also profited from emerging scientific explanations of the social world, especially the influence of past experiences on present behavior. Instead of the limited background story and variety of stage action employed in historical plays, Scribe’s well-made plays used lengthy background story (mostly scandalous secrets) with its attendant requirement for a more considerable amount of “sit-down” conversation (narrated action). Indeed, these early realistic plays were referred to as “sit-down plays” to distinguish them from historical plays, where standing is the norm. As a further acknowledgment of the emerging scientific temperament, Scribe’s plays also included methodically coordinated patterns of action and deception, a climactic scene in which the unknown parts of the background story come from opposed characters, and a convincing resolution in which a new relationship establishes itself among the opposing characters. Scribe (and his staff) wrote over 400 such well-made plays, and his work had a significant influence on the development of realistic drama worldwide. A great deal of dramatic writing today is still based on Scribe’s model, particularly in commercial film and television.

In Scribe’s realistic method, background story is divided into small passages, shared among many characters, and disclosed in bits and pieces throughout the entire play. This method helped to achieve realistic plausibility; that is, to produce the illusion of psychological plausibility. Scholars call this way of treating background story the retrospective method because the onstage action moves forward in time while the past moves backward in time. The key to its effectiveness is to avoid revealing the most important facts of the background story until as late as possible in the play, at the point when its disclosure is most dramatically compelling.

Although this method seemed to provide well-made plays with a more convincing sense of everyday life, its initial use by playwrights was somewhat awkward by later standards. A typical well-made play, for example, employed an opening scene in which two minor characters performed household duties while gossiping about their employer’s past. This type of opening was so widespread in early realistic plays that

it came to be called the “below-stairs scene” because it almost always involved servants, whose living quarters in those times were generally located downstairs.

An interesting point about the retrospective method is that it was, in fact, the reworking of a model that had remained by and large unexploited for almost 2,400 years. Few dramatists handled retrospective method more effectively than Sophocles did in *Oedipus Rex*, whose plot is a murder mystery told retrospectively. A “detective” (Oedipus) searches for a murderer by inquiring into the past, and step-by-step discovers that the criminal turns out to be himself. Notwithstanding its early date of composition, *Oedipus Rex* remains an excellent, though schematic, example of the retrospective method.

Henrik Ibsen learned to understand the well-made play and its associated retrospective method while he was managing director at the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen and the Christiana Theatre. He produced many of Scribe’s plays at those theatres and drew from this experience when writing his earliest realistic plays. Scribe was a skillful craftsman, but Ibsen brought the sensibility of an artist to his writing. For example, in the opening of Ibsen’s play, *The Wild Duck*, the old family servant, Petersen, and a hired servant, Jensen, do indeed gossip about the prominent members of society present at the dinner party in another room. On the page, this is a typical below-stairs scene, but Ibsen added a refinement. He seldom treated his secondary characters as simple functionaries to disclose background story. Petersen and Jensen have distinctive personalities with plausible motives for gossiping about the dubious “pillars of society” present at the dinner party in the adjoining room. Ibsen’s background story is artistic as well as dramatic because it reveals as much about the present—the self-serving hypocrisy of Petersen, Jensen, and the town leaders—as it does about the past. As time went on, Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, August Strindberg, George Bernard Shaw, and Eugene O’Neill became extremely proficient with the retrospective method. In their best works, the past unfolds with inspired astuteness for dramatic expression.

3. *Minimalist Method*

In an increasing number of plays today, the background story seems inadequate to motivate the onstage behavior of the characters. **These plays employ the minimalist method, in which the background story is so altered, reduced, or concealed that it is almost impossible to distinguish without very close reading.** Moreover, a feeling

of uncertainty and elusiveness often goes along with this method—as in, did it really happen, do the characters only imagine that it happened, or is someone being deliberately untruthful? Nevertheless, background story still plays a significant if not crucial role. *American Buffalo* is a good example. Who was the mysterious coin collector that purchased the five-cent American Buffalo coin from Don? Who is Fletch, the pivotal character everyone knows and respects, but we never see? What happened with Teach, Gracie, and Ruthie to make Fletch so angry with them? How did Don come to respect Teach so devotedly, respect that leads to disaster for both him and Bob? How did Don come to own the junk shop? The answers to these questions are central to the play, but it takes careful reading to uncover them because they are seldom spoken about reliably.

Minimalist background story is a radical extension of the modern retrospective method. The main difference lies in reducing the quantity of background story to a bare minimum and then disclosing what remains through intricate, complicated hints in preference to, but without entirely doing away with, open disclosure. Minimalist background story requires patient and imaginative analysis to unearth every scrap of information. It also needs close attention to tempo, rhythm, and mood in performance to illuminate every veiled hint and casual allusion these plays depend on for their effectiveness on stage.

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Identification of Content

Background story contains events, character descriptions, and feelings. Which type is most important depends on the nature of the play, the characters, and the specific situation emerging in the play.

4. Events

Events in the background story are turning points that change the behavior not only of those originally present but also of those present at the disclosure. Events of this type are crucial because they provide the source of onstage conflicts. Here are some examples of background story containing such events.

Two crucial background story events appear in Mama Younger's statement to her son, Walter, in *A Raisin in the Sun*, "Son—do you know your wife is expecting another baby?" The crucial event is the revelation of Ruth's pregnancy.

Another example is Hjalmar Ekdal's confession in *The Wild Duck* that his father, elderly Lieutenant Ekdal, "considered" suicide when

he went to prison for fraud. Hjalmar tells his friend, Gregers Werle, "When the sentence of imprisonment was passed—he had the pistol in his hand." In the conformist special world of this play, Lieutenant Ekdal was falsely convicted of a crime that ruined him and fated his family to social ostracism.

In *Mother Courage*, the Recruiter discloses a crucial event when he says to the Sergeant, "The General wants me to recruit four platoons by the twelfth." The fact that the General will have him shot if he does not enlist ninety new men by the end of the week explains why the Recruiter shows little sympathy for reluctant recruits later in the play.

In *A Lie of the Mind*, Sally says to Lorraine, her mother, "Right then I knew what Jake had in mind." "What?" asks Lorraine. "Jake had decided to kill him." What is crucial here is the cold, hard reality of Jake's violent temperament, even though his mother thinks differently about him.

Background stories are composed of crucial events like these, but one character's account of past events should not be taken at face value unthinkingly. It is not that characters sometimes lie; they tell the truth as they see it. However, even a lie told as truth is revealing if studied carefully.

5. Character Descriptions

Character descriptions in the background story take in those who are named or otherwise involved. This feature of the background story is as crucial for costume designers as it is for actors and directors.

In *Tartuffe*, Orgon offers this description of his daughter's suitor: "I had promised you to Valere, but apart from the fact that he's said to be a bit of a gambler, I suspect him of being a free thinker." Orgon heard from someone that Valere was a gambler, and from previous encounters, Orgon already suspected Valere's "free-thinking" values.

Joseph Surface receives this admiring character description from Sir Peter Teazle in *The School for Scandal*: "Joseph is indeed what a youth should be—everyone in the world speaks well of him." Teazle's opinion turns out to be completely wrong.

Willy Loman recalls his brother Ben in *Death of a Salesman*: "There was the only man I ever met who knew all the answers." Later we learn that Ben was a fraud and that his impressive boasting seriously misled Willie.

Doaker speaks about his niece, Berniece, to Boy Willie in *The Piano Lesson*:

She still got [her husband] Crawley on her mind. He has been dead three years but she still holding on to him. She needs to go out here and let one of those fellows grab a whole handful of whatever she got. She act like it done got precious.

Berniece is in danger of becoming a professional widow.

6. Feelings

Feelings in the background story include past feelings and sensory perceptions or present feelings resulting from them. Characters reveal their feelings from and about the past in subtle ways. In *The Wild Duck*, when Hjalmar Ekdal's father went to prison for fraud, it was also an embarrassing time for Hjalmar:

I kept the blinds drawn down over both my windows. When I peeped out, I saw the sun shining as if nothing had happened. I could not understand it. I saw people going along the street, laughing and talking about indifferent things. I could not understand it. It seemed to me that the whole of existence must be at a standstill—as if under an eclipse.

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To which Gregers Werle adds, "I felt that too, when my mother died." Here Hjalmar and Gregers share a moment of sentimental self-dramatization.

In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman tells Linda he often feels lonely on the road: "I get so lonely—in particular when business is bad and there's nobody to talk to. I get the feeling that I'll never sell anything again." His loneliness leads him to seek other women, exposure of which results in the major climax of the play.

Lorraine's repressed feelings about her husband's disappearance are the subject of these remarks to her daughter, Beth, in *A Lie of the Mind*:

LORRAINE. Wonder? Did I ever wonder? You know a man your whole life. You grow up with him. You're almost raised together. You go to school on the same bus together. You go through tornadoes together in the same

basement. You go through a war together. You have babies together. And then one day he just up and disappears into thin air. Did I ever wonder? Yeah. You bet your sweet life I wondered. But you know where all that wondering got me? Nowhere. Absolutely nowhere. Because here I am. Alone. Just the same as though he'd never even existed.

Lorraine's tangled, conflicting feelings about her husband are typical of the complicated background story found in Sam Shepard's plays.

These examples show that past feelings expressed through the background story are also valuable for understanding the characters who are engaged in the onstage action.

Background Story in Practice

To learn how past events, character descriptions, and feelings work together in more extended passages of dialogue, consider the examples of the historical, modern, and minimalist methods below. Background story is underlined.

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1. *Historical Method*

Hamlet is the type of play in which the background story appears in extended passages early in the play. The murder of King Hamlet is the single most significant background story event. In 1,5 the Ghost discloses the circumstances surrounding this event in several lengthy speeches. Background story in this scene is a seamless merging of events, character descriptions, and feelings. The Ghost begins by disclosing the physical pain he has suffered in limbo since his death.

GHOST. I am thy father's spirit,
Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confin'd to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of
nature
Are burnt and purg'd away.

In the next eleven lines, he explains why he cannot tell Hamlet what purgatory is like, and describes how Hamlet would feel if he knew the nature of his father's sufferings.

GHOST. But that I am forbid
To tell the secrets of my prison-house,
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young
blood,
Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from
their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part,
And each particular hair to stand on end,
Like quills upon the fretful porpentine.
But this eternal blazon must not be
To ears of flesh and blood.

Now the Ghost discloses that he was murdered, which is the primary event in the background story. He adds the feeling that blood ties and incest made the crime even more heinous.

GHOST. List, List, O, List!
If thou didst ever thy dear father love—
HAMLET. O God!
GHOST. Revenge his foul and most unnatural
murder.
HAMLET. Murder!
GHOST. Murder most foul, as in the best it is;
But this most foul, strange, and unnatural.

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A few lines later, the Ghost picks up the thread of the background story events once again.

GHOST. Now, Hamlet, hear;
'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard
A serpent stung me; so the whole ear of
Denmark
Is by a forged process of my death
Rankly abused; but know, thou noble youth, The
serpent that did sting thy father's life
Now wears his crown.
HAMLET. O my prophetic soul!
My uncle!

The Ghost adds a character description of Claudius, condemning the incestuous relationship with Gertrude and the murder by his brother.

GHOST. Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With wicked witchcraft of his wits, with
traitorous gifts—
O wicked wit and gifts that have the power
So to seduce—won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming virtuous queen.

Now follow eleven lines contrasting King Hamlet's idealistic love of Gertrude with Claudius's cynical lust.

GHOST. O Hamlet, what a falling off was there,
From me, whose love was of that dignity
That it went hand in hand even with the
vow I made to her in marriage; and to
decline
Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor
To those of mine!

The next sixteen lines contain a vivid account of the murder itself.

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GHOST. But soft! Methinks I scent the morning air.
Brief let me be. Sleeping within my orchard,
My custom always of the afternoon,
Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole,
With juice of cursed hebona in a vial,
And in the porches of mine ears did pour
The leprous distillment; whose effect
Holds such an enmity with blood of man
That swift as quicksilver it courses through
The natural gates and alleys of the body;
And with a sudden vigour it doth posset
And curd, like eager droppings into milk,
The thin and wholesome blood. So did it mine;
And a most instant tetter bark'd about,
Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust,
All my smooth body.

Seven lines of religious feelings follow.

GHOST. Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's
hand Of life, of crown, of queen, at once
dispatch'd;

Cut off even in the blossom of my sin,
Unhousl'd [no Holy Communion], disappointed,
unanel'd [no final rites];
No reck'ning made [no confession], but sent
to my account
With all my imperfections on my head.
 O, Horrible! Horrible! most horrible!

The Ghost concludes the scene by challenging Hamlet to avenge his murder. In this scene, a single character disclosed the background story in a few long speeches, which comprises an economic and well-composed mixture of events, character descriptions, and feelings.

2. Realistic Method

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, several different characters disclose the background story retrospectively and in small fragments. This passage with Walter Jr. and his wife, Ruth, occurs near the beginning of the play. It centers on Walter's scheme for starting a liquor store with his buddies Bobo and Willie. Their project will require \$10,000 from his father's life insurance. In this scene, background story events, character descriptions, and feelings mix just as they did in *Hamlet*. However, the passage requires attentive reading to unravel the complicated mixture and grasp its significance in the scenes to come.

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WALTER. You want to know what I was thinking
'bout in the bathroom this morning?

RUTH. No.

WALTER. How come you always got to be so
pleasant?

RUTH. What is there to be pleasant 'bout?

WALTER. You want to know what I was thinking
 'bout in the bathroom or not?

RUTH. I know what you was thinking 'bout.

WALTER. (*ignoring her*) 'Bout what me an' Willy
Harris was talking about last night.

RUTH. (*immediately – a refrain*) Willy Harris is
a good-for-nothing loud mouth.

WALTER. Anybody who talks to me has got to be
a good-for-nothing loud mouth, ain't he?
And what you know about who is just a good-
for-nothing loud mouth? Charlie Atkins was

just a "good-for-nothing loudmouth" too,
wasn't he? When he wanted me to go into the
dry-cleaning business with him. And now-
he's grossing a hundred thousand dollars
a year. A hundred thousand dollars a year!
You still call him a loud mouth?

RUTH. *(bitterly)* Oh, Walter Lee.

(She folds her head on her arms over the table.)

WALTER. *(rising and coming over to her and standing over her)* You tired, ain't you?
Tired of everything. Me, the boy, the way
we live-this beat up hole-everything. Ain't
you? So tired-moaning and groaning all the
time, but you wouldn't do nothing to help,
would you? You couldn't be on my side that
long for nothing could you?

RUTH. Walter, please leave me alone.

WALTER. A man needs for a woman to back him up ...

RUTH. Walter-

WALTER. Mama would listen to you. You know
she listen to you more than she do me
and Bennie. She think more of you, too.
All you have to do is just sit down with
her when you drinking your coffee one
morning and talking 'bout things like
you do - (He sits down beside her and
demonstrates graphically what he thinks
her methods and tone should be.)-you just
sip your coffee, see, and say easy like
that you been thinking 'bout that deal
Walter Lee is so interested in, 'bout the
store, and all, and sip some more coffee,
like what you saying ain't really that
important to you-and the next thing you
know, she be listening good and asking you
questions and when I come home-I can tell
her the details. This ain't no fly-by-
night proposition, baby. I mean we got it
figured out, me and Willy and Bobo.

RUTH. *(with a frown)* Bobo?

WALTER. Yeah. You see, this little liquor store
we got in mind cost seventy-five thousand

and we figured the initial investment on the place be 'bout thirty thousand, see. That be ten thousand each. Course, there's a couple of hundred you got to pay so's you don't spend the rest of your life just waitin' for them clowns to let your license get approved-

RUTH. You mean graft?

WALTER. (*frowning impatiently*) Don't call it that. See there, that just goes to show you what women understand about the world. Baby, don't nothing happen in this world 'less you pay somebody off!

RUTH. Walter, leave me alone! (*She raises her head and stares at him vigorously - then says, more quietly.*) Eat your eggs, they gonna be cold.

WALTER. (*straightening up from her and looking off*) That's it. There you are. Man say to his woman: I got me a dream. His woman say: eat your eggs. (*sadly, but gaining in power*) Man say: I got to take hold of this here world, baby! And a woman will say: Eat your eggs and go to work. (*passionately now*) Man say: I got to change my life. I'm choking to death, baby! And his woman say -(*in utter anguish as he brings his fists down on his thighs*)-Your eggs is getting cold!

RUTH. (*softly*) Walter, that ain't none of our money.

WALTER. (*not listening at all or even looking at her*) This morning, I was lookin' in the mirror and thinking about it ... I'm thirty-five years old; I been married eleven years and I got a boy who sleeps in the living room - (very, very quietly) and all I got to give him is stories about how rich people live ...

RUTH. Eat your eggs, Walter.

WALTER. Damn my eggs ... damn all the eggs that ever was!

RUTH. Then go to work.

WALTER. (*looking at her*) See-I'm trying to talk to you 'bout myself-(*shaking his head with*

the repetition)—and all you can say is eat them eggs and go to work.

RUTH. (wearily) Honey, you never say anything new. I listen to you every day, every night, and every morning, and you never say nothing new. (shrugging) So you would rather be Mr. Arnold than be his chauffeur. So—I would rather be living in Buckingham Palace.

WALTER. That's just what is wrong with the colored women in this world ... Don't understand about building their men up and making 'em feel like they somebody. Like they can do something.

RUTH. (dryly, but to hurt) There are colored men who do things.

WALTER. No thanks to the colored woman.

RUTH. Well, being a colored woman, I guess I can't help myself none.

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This is a model piece of realistic writing and an excellent example of the realistic method of background story. This passage, and indeed Hansberry's entire play, will reward careful study in this regard.

3. *Minimalist Method*

Compared to the examples above, a lesser amount of background story appears in *A Lie of the Mind*. Only two previous events are crucial: Jake's abuse of his wife, Beth, and the death of Jake's father. In 1,1 and 1,3, Jake discloses the entire story about Beth through several long speeches in the standard historical manner. After those two scenes, her life and character are apparent to us through the historical method. The story of Jake's father, however, emerges in minimalist fashion. We learn very little about him; not even his name. Moreover, the disclosures develop guardedly—through hints, abridged anecdotes, indirect references, discarded objects, "character transformations," etc. The father's life and character are a mystery, and yet his spirit exerts a strange power over his family.

In 1,7, Jake seems to have forgotten about his father until he finds himself in his childhood bedroom back home. He is traumatized by guilt from abusing his wife, while his mother, Lorraine, tries to nurse him out of his depression. Suddenly, Jake stops and stares at

the dusty models of World War II airplanes hanging from the ceiling above his bed. References to his father slowly emerge, but they are minimalist—vague, cryptic, incomplete.

JAKE. I can't stay here.

LORRAINE. Why not? You never shoulda' left in the first place. This was the first room you ever had to yourself.

JAKE. Where were we before?

LORRAINE. You mean, before here?

JAKE. Yeah. Where were we before?

LORRAINE. You-name-it-U.S.A. Those were the days we chased your Daddy from one air-base to the next. Always tryin' to catch up with the next "Secret Mission." Some secret. He was always cookin' up some weird code on the phone. Tryin' to make a big drama outa' things. Thought it was romantic I guess. Worst of all was I fell for it. (JAKE wanders around the space, trying to recognize it.)

JAKE. What code?

LORRAINE. Oh, I can't remember them now. There was lots of 'em. It was so many years ago. He'd make 'em all up.

JAKE. Why'd he use a code?

LORRAINE. He said it was because they didn't want him to reveal his location.

JAKE. Did you believe him?

LORRAINE. Yeah. Why shouldn't I of?

JAKE. Maybe he was lyin'.

LORRAINE. Why would he do that?

JAKE. So you wouldn't know what he was up to. That's why.

LORRAINE. That was back when we were in love.

JAKE. Oh.

LORRAINE. That was back before things went to pieces.

JAKE. *(Still moving around the space.)* But we finally tracked him down, huh?

LORRAINE. Yeah. 'Course we tracked him down. Turned out to not be worth the trip, but we found him all right.

JAKE. Where?

LORRAINE. Different places. You were pretty
little then.

JAKE. Little.

LORRAINE. Just a spit of a thing. I used to pack
you to sleep in a dresser drawer. You were
that tiny.

JAKE. You didn't close the drawer. Did ya'?

LORRAINE. No. 'Course not.

What attracts attention in this passage is Lorraine's reluctance to talk about her husband, Jake's father. Jake presses her for more information, but she redirects his questions back to her relationship with Jake. Their hesitant behavior is evidence of the father's lingering influence on his wife and son. Jake's curiosity about him is also intriguing. What is the specific nature of his emotional response here? Has he forgotten his childhood? And if so, why? Did he love his father, and does he miss him now? Why does Jake later tell his sister he has made a determined effort not to be like their father? The minimalist treatment of the father in the background story raises more questions about the present than it answers about the past, which is a chief purpose of the minimalist method.

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Background Story in Nonrealistic Plays

Nonrealistic plays tend to have short and straightforward character histories and are more likely to reveal information about the theme world of the play, its closed system, than about background story alone. The disclosure may be in extended passages, bits and pieces, uncertain and elusive hints, or any combination of these. Whatever the case may be, background story in nonrealistic plays contains the required events, character descriptions, and feelings, but they are managed in a way that is overtly theme-related. We will explain more about this below, but first some examples.

The background story in *Machinal* contains only a handful of references to Helen's earlier home life with her family, a time when she still believed her mother and father loved each other. The Young Man, with whom she later has a brief affair, discloses a little information about his past involvement in the Mexican Revolution, which started in 1910 and was the first political revolution of the twentieth century. Though not especially eventful in the usual sense, their background stories nevertheless establish that Helen lives in a brutal cold-hearted

world and that a lover of hers is among those who are fighting to change this play's special world. While the background story supports the theme world of the play, it is primarily Helen's onstage actions that show her to be a stranger in this strange land.

In *Mother Courage* (and other plays), Brecht makes a point of neutralizing the emotional influence of background story by disclosing it with explanatory placards at the beginning of each scene. Brecht intends to do away with history as a motivating factor and concentrate instead on what is happening to the characters in the present. He wants to focus the audience's attention on the characters' potentially changeable present instead of the unchangeable past.

Winnie chatters about numerous background story events in *Happy Days*: the dances, friendships, love affairs, visits from strangers, deaths, etc. Her reminiscences not only keep up her spirits but are events that were supposed to be happy, productive, culturally uplifting. The background story subjects are not so much crucial events as signs that life for this couple has been an endless series of unfulfilled dreams.

The crucial events in the background story of *The Birthday Party* consist of Stanley's ruined career as a pianist (artist), his retreat to a seaside boarding house run by Meg and Petey, and a vague prior relationship he had with Goldberg and McCann, which for some unknown yet compelling reason causes them to track him down and take him away to someplace unpleasant. Once again, the background story as such is not as important as the destructive power Goldberg and McCann exercise in the present over Stanley as well as Petey, Meg, and Lulu.

In *Fefu and Her Friends*, a group of educated women gathers to plan a children's project. According to the playwright, the play was set in 1935 because that era was "pre-Freud." In other words, it was a time when one's past did not play such a crucial role in one's self-image, and people tended to accept each other at face value without always interpreting each other or themselves in light of the past. The traditional questions (who these characters are, how they became what they are, etc.) are less important than how the characters come to terms with what is happening to them on stage in the present.

The opening scene in *Top Girls* could be considered a scene of background story, in that it illustrates the choices made by a selection of independent-minded women from history. All of them overcame significant obstacles to achieve distinction, except that in each case they opted for power when they had an opportunity to choose genuine personal emancipation. This pattern establishes a frame of reference to observe Marlene as she follows the same path throughout the remaining action.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is one of those plays with almost a complete absence of background story. We know as little about the two title characters here as we do about Shakespeare's original models. The play's meaning revolves around the uncertainty of the present, not the certainty of the past. Guildenstern's notions about the unchangeable past restrain him from grasping the continual changeability of the present.

Angels in America is in many ways a summary example of non-realism on the question of background story. Its dramatic subject is "beautiful systems dying, old fixed orders spiraling apart" (1,3). Established principles of democracy, politics, law, religion, family, and friendship are all in a state of collapse. At first glance, the background story appears to be conventional regarding its quantity and method of disclosure. In contrast to traditional practice, however, the focus is not on what happened in the past, but on the fact that the old world—the world of progress, justice, and benevolent Providence—is presently coming to an end. Thus, the question to ask is how the characters come to terms with their present reality. Will Joe Pitt and Louis Ironson choose to be passive bystanders (victims) of history or active builders of the future?

The tendency shown in *Angels in America* and nonrealistic drama, in general, is toward more onstage action and less background story, toward more action and less narration. Changes in dramatic form like this do not happen by themselves or in a social vacuum. They are a product of the deep feelings of individual artists confronting the cultural trends of a particular period. Then again, a textbook on script analysis is not the place to discuss the influence of history on dramatic form. We can only observe how playwrights treat background story in their work. It is enough to say that in their search for a way to express a present-day view of the world, certain playwrights are testing realism's emphasis on the past, on background story.

Summary

Background story denotes everything that happened to the characters before the beginning of the play. The **historical method** refers to background story that emerges mainly in extended passages near the beginning of the play. In the **realistic method**, background story is divided into smaller portions, shared among more characters, and disclosed in bits and pieces throughout later scenes. In the **minimalist method**, background story is so altered, reduced, or concealed

that it is almost impossible to distinguish without very close reading, **Events in the background story** are turning points that change the behavior not only of those originally present but also those present at the disclosure. **Character descriptions in the background story** take in those who are named or otherwise involved. **Feelings in the background story** include past feelings and sensory perceptions or present feelings resulting from them. **Background story in nonrealistic plays** contains the expected events, character descriptions, and feelings, but managed in a way that is overtly theme-related.

Exercises for a Scene or Short Play

1. **Method of disclosure.** Is the background story disclosed in extended passages? In short statements? In subtle hints and veiled allusions? How reliable are the characters who reveal the background story? Is the background story disclosed near the beginning of the play? Throughout the entire play? Any disclosed near the end of the play? How much background story is there compared to onstage action? Where does the action of the play begin in relation to the background story? In relation to the end of the play?
2. **Identification of content.** What specific events are disclosed in the background story? How long ago did they occur? What is the original chronology of events? In what order are the events revealed in the play? Besides events, are there any character descriptions in the background story? Any feelings or sensory impressions? In what ways are they interconnected among the events in the background story? Write a complete report of each character's background story. Provide a full description of the background story as told by all the characters. What does the background story require from or suggest about the physical production? How could the physical production contribute to the expressiveness of the background story?
3. **Following Action Analysis.** Search for the presence of the play's seed in the background story. How does the seed shape the background story? Why did the playwright choose this specific background story content from the whole range of other possibilities to dramatize the seed? In what way would the use of different background story content change the seed and vice versa? In what way could associating the seed with the background story and physical production contribute to the expressiveness of the play?

Plot

External and Internal Action in the Dialogue

What Is Plot?

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The word plot comes from two sources, the Old French word *complot*, meaning a secret scheme, and the old English word *plat*, indicating a plan or map. Plot has parallel meanings related to intrigues or conspiracies and suspense. Aristotle understood plot as the first principle and, as it were, “soul” of drama. He described plot as the imitation of the dramatic action (action performed with a specific purpose in mind) and the arrangement of the incidents. He also said the most effective plots have a beginning, middle, and end, thus representing a complete action. Scholars continue to debate Aristotle’s ideas about plot, but that is not of concern at this moment. Most readers and audiences—and that takes in actors, directors, and designers—expect that a play will have a plot, even if it is not immediately apparent what they mean.

In the simplest possible terms, **plot means an account of connected events**. For most of us, there is an added sense that these events are not only connected but also moving ahead and leading somewhere conclusive. An arrangement of this type serves to sustain interest in how everything comes together in the end by evoking the questions “What happened?” “What is happening?” and “What will happen?” A plot could be weak or lacking in one or more of these functions, but most of us would sense that something was missing—or strange, a sensation that is used in nonrealistic plays and treated later in this chapter.

It is not necessary to describe plot more than this, but someone who tried would be required to deal with at least three fundamental features: (1) external and internal action in the dialogue,

(2) progressions, and (3) structure. This chapter discusses external and internal action in the dialogue and the next deals with progressions and structure.

External Action in the Dialogue

The first responsibility of plot is to provide the external action necessary to carry out its events. **External action in the dialogue refers to statements about entrances and exits, blocking, physical production, and special activities.** This kind of information represents the first and most obvious level of plot, that which indicates blocking and stage business and develops the elementary storyline. Customarily, stage directions provide at least some of this information, because they represent a reasonably accurate record of the physical aspects of the original production. If play analysis is intended for a new play or a new production of an established play, however, dialogue is typically considered a more reliable source of information. Even when there is little apparent external action in the dialogue, essential information can be inferred or, better still, re-imagined without falling back on the stage directions from the original performance.

Most if not all features in performance and physical production have their source in the dialogue itself. Actors, directors, and designers who know how to search out and respond to external action in the dialogue are capable of taking on their measure of responsibility in preparing for a production. They bring something factual and specific to table work.

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Entrances and Exits

Entrances and exits change the numerical composition of characters on stage, thus stopping the ongoing action and starting a new action. They identify who is, who was, or who will be on stage as well as where they came from and where they are going. In film and television, there is less need for writing entrances or exits in the dialogue because the camera follows the characters wherever they go. In a play, however, all the characters must inevitably come to or leave from the stage platform to accomplish their actions, while generally (though not always) requiring explanatory statements in the dialogue. Equally important, entrances and exits (or curtains or blackouts) always begin or conclude an action, just as arrivals and departures do in film and television. (The “French Scene” is a term closely associated with entrances and exits and will be treated in the next chapter.)

The following example from *Oedipus Rex* shows Creon's entrance.

CHORUS. But lo, he comes to answer for himself.

The following two examples from *Hamlet* are filled with emotion. The entrance is Horatio's warning to Hamlet of the appearance of the Ghost; Hamlet's insistence on following the Ghost provides the exit.

HORATIO. Look, my lord, it comes!

...

HAMLET. Go on; I'll follow thee.

Molière incorporates both emotion and details about the physical production in this exit from *Tartuffe*.

ORGON. I'm so incensed ... I shall have to go
outside to recover myself.

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In this exit from *A Raisin in the Sun*, Mama Younger expresses her approval of Beneatha's new boyfriend, who has just departed.

MAMA. Lord, that's a pretty thing just went out
of here!

Since arrivals and departures significantly affect the course of action and the physical production, entrances and exits call for careful study. Who is coming and going, where they are coming from and going to, and who is on stage together right now are some of the essential features of the plot; not to mention where the characters are going to or coming from between entrances and exits.

Blocking

Blocking is the movement and positioning of the characters on stage. Blocking not only communicates the plot visually but also helps the actors to intensify their actions and character relationships. Characters attract and repel each other like polarized magnets: they are close to each other in climactic or affectionate moments and remain apart in moments of higher tension. Most of this spatial sensitivity comes from within the play itself, but with attentive interpretation, it can also be detected through the dialogue.

Envisioning the blocking and physical production during the process of reading is one of the necessary skills of play analysis.

Here are some examples of blocking in the dialogue, external action required for the movement and positioning of the characters on stage. In the first example, Oedipus provides a picture of the stage positions of the Chorus, some of their costume accessories, and a scenery item. The words “strewn” and “before” (in this translation) indicate that the characters are located around the *thymele* (central altar), which was a standard architectural feature of classical Greek theatres.

OEDIPUS. My children ...

Why have you strewn yourselves before these
altars

In supplication, with your boughs and
garlands?

A moment before this line from *Death of a Salesman*, Biff has discovered his father in a hotel room with another woman. Willy pushes her into the bathroom because he does not want his son to see her.

WILLY. All right, stay in the bathroom here, and
don't come out. I think there's a law in
Massachusetts, so don't come out.

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Note how this statement also reveals information about character, physical production, and atmosphere.

Physical Production

The third type of external action involves physical production. **Physical production refers to elements of scenery, costumes, lighting, properties, sound, and makeup used by or referred to by the characters.** Physical production tends to be one of the objectively real things in performance, and as such it assists in placing the play in a particular time and place. Like blocking, physical production has both storytelling and dramatic aspects. It tells the story when characters use elements of physical production to carry out the plot and identify the given circumstances; it's dramatic when physical production assists in intensifying the expression of feelings, relationships, theme, and atmosphere.

After Hamlet speaks with the Ghost, he asks his friends not to reveal what they have seen. The statement implies that he uses a sword on which his friends are expected to ceremoniously place their hands.

HAMLET. Swear by my sword
Never to speak of this that you have heard,

Hjalmar's warning to Hedvig about the pistol in *The Wild Duck* is also an external action that prepares future plot information. This writing practice is called loading, funding, or foreshadowing—literary terms that refer to the accumulation of dramatic potential before execution of a decisive action.

HJALMAR. Don't touch that pistol, Hedvig! One
of the barrels is loaded, remember that.

Avery's blessing near the end of *The Piano Lesson* shows a feature of physical production that takes on additional meaning as part of a spiritual ritual.

AVERY. Seem like that piano's causing all the
trouble. I can bless that. Berniece, put
me some water in that bottle ... Hold this
candle. Whatever you do, make sure it don't
go out.

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Special Activities

The fourth category of external action involves performative movement and positioning outside of regular blocking. **Special activities are goings-on outside those typically found in a play; that is, beyond standing, sitting, eating, drinking, smoking, walking, talking, arriving, departing, and so on.** Special activities typically require a specific set of skills and separate rehearsal time.

Hamlet's unintentional murder of Polonius is a turning point in the play and must be performed as such, not as a matter-of-fact accident. After all, this is the first time Hamlet has ever killed anyone, even if it is not Claudius as he intended. Polonius has been hiding behind a curtain where he can eavesdrop. Involved here are blocking before, during, and after the act of killing; plausible handling of a weapon; a convincing death; and practical features of physical production. Anyone who has done this play knows how complicated this event is to stage satisfactorily.

POLONIUS. (*behind*) What ho! help, help, help!
HAMLET. (*draws*) How now! a rat?

Dead for a ducat, dead!

(kills POLONIUS with a pass through the arras)

POLONIUS. (behind) O, I am slain!

Mrs. Sorby's piano playing is the subject of this passage from *The Wild Duck*. When she goes into an adjoining room, she begins to play a cheerful tune. The genteel music (not explicitly identified in the script), mannerly dinner-party goings-on (sound cues), and refined conversation of the guests (unscripted) continue in the background throughout the following scene, where it serves as an emotional counterpoint to the angry quarrel between Gregers and his father.

GUEST. Shall we play a duet, Mrs. Sorby?

MRS. SORBY. Yes, suppose we do.

GUESTS. Bravo, bravo!

Nigerian folk dance is a subject of this external action in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Besides specific folk-dancing skills, the characters need both space to dance and costume accessories to clarify the particular nature of the action.

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RUTH. What kind of dance is that?

BENEATHA. A folk dance.

RUTH. What kind of folks do that, honey?

BENEATHA. It's from Nigeria. It's a dance of welcome.

Identifying and processing these and other sorts of special activities will help to reveal their dramatic potential as well as their influence on the physical production.

Internal Action in the Dialogue

Plot is often understood as primarily an external phenomenon. According to this viewpoint, plays with strong plots contain physical activities, such as entrances and exits, fights and hazards and rescues, secrets and lies, crimes and misdemeanors, and similar types of clever and interesting external actions. However, plot is more than a collection of external activities; for besides its external features, it also occurs inside the characters, changing their internal as well as external lives. Internal action refers to this nonphysical, psychological dimension of the plot.

When internal action is stated openly in the dialogue, it takes the form of effective assertions, plans, and commands—effective in that they produce necessary outcomes in the play. There is nothing unusual or mysterious about these three forms. They simply state something about the plot together with the attitude of the character toward what is being said. They are similar to the grammatical principle of mood, whether making an assertion (indicative mood), posing a plan (subjunctive mood), or giving a command (imperative mood).

Like the external actions explained above, knowledge of and response to the internal actions stated in the dialogue enable those involved to assume their share of responsibility in the preparation of the production. Actors need to be aware of their responsibility to identify themselves and their conversers by means of movements and gestures to maintain correct visual focus on stage. As well, designers need to be aware of their responsibility to maintain correct visual focus by the means of physical production specific to themselves.

Effective Assertions

Effective assertions are statements of fact that identify or produce changes in the characters, physical production, or action. Assertions are perhaps the purest forms of internal action in the dialogue. In one way or another, they appear on almost every page of a script. The basic principle needs a little explaining. An assertion is a plain statement of a fact, a declaration that something is true or false, and an effective assertion achieves a desirable truth effect, such as, “That lamp is turned off,” at which point the actor points to or moves toward a lamp provided by a scenery designer which will shortly be switched on according to a lighting designer’s plot. Sometimes plays contain straightforward assertions like this, but mostly the assertions found in plays produce an outcome in the characters and action, such as, “I now pronounce you man and wife,” at which point the actors embrace and thereafter relate to each other in a noticeably different manner. Thus, assertions need to identify someone or something in the play and produce a noticeable outcome to be effective.

Several examples follow in which the dialogue is understood literally, but there are times when dialogue should not be read this way. As we said in the last chapter, sometimes characters deceive themselves or lie. Even these occasions are instructive, however, because

dialogue must be read in a literal manner before it can be read in other ways. We must know the truth before we can know if a statement is false or not.

In 1,2 of *The School for Scandal*, Rowley announces to Sir Peter Teazle the surprise arrival of wealthy Sir Oliver Surface in London. How and from where does Rowley enter?

ROWLEY. Sir Oliver is arrived, and at this
moment is in town.

Rowley's announcement involves four explicit assertions: a person (Sir Oliver), an event (is arrived), a time (at this moment), and a place (in town). This statement is an effective assertion because it has consequences. Sir Oliver, the rich uncle of the brothers Charles and Joseph Surface, plans a ruse to prove to his friend, Sir Peter Teazle, that Joseph is a hypocrite and Charles is honest.

The following statement from *The Wild Duck* asserts a crucial event: Hedvig Ekdal has shot herself. This statement is an effective assertion because it not only reveals Hedvig's death but also exposes her father as a fool and his friend, Gregers Werle, as a cold-blooded zealot. Note how repetition increases the impact of this assertion.

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RELLING. What's the matter here?

GINA. They say Hedvig shot herself.

HJALMAR. Come and help us!

RELLING. Shot herself!

It is an effective assertion when Damis states that Tartuffe has attempted to seduce Elmire, who is Tartuffe's wife and Damis' step-mother. Damis' assertions involve a person (Tartuffe) and an event (seduction). Note also in this passage that the number of words devoted to advancing the plot is minimal. Most of the words describe Damis' feelings about Tartuffe, Orgon, and Elmire—Damis is an emotional young man.

DAMIS. We have interesting news for you, father.
Something has just occurred which will
astonish you. You are well repaid for your
kindness! The gentleman sets a very high
value on the consideration you have shown
for him! He has just been demonstrating his
passionate concern for you and he stops at

nothing less than dishonoring your bed. I have just overheard him making a disgraceful declaration of his guilty passion for your wife. She, in kind-heartedness and over-anxiety to be discreet, was all for keeping it secret but I can't condone such shameless behavior. I consider it would be a gross injustice to you to keep it from you.

Sometimes effective assertions hide behind apparent trivialities. When Teach enquires about Don's secret scheme with Bob to steal some rare coins, Don attempts to hide something important by saying the matter is not important.

TEACH. So what is this thing with the kid
[i.e., Bob]?

(Pause.)

I mean is it anything, uh ...?

DON. It's nothing ... you know ...

TEACH. Yeah.

(Pause.)

It's *what* ...?

DON. You know, it's just some guy we spotted.

TEACH. Yeah. Some guy.

DON. Yeah.

TEACH. Some guy.

DON. Yeah.

(Pause.)

In any form, effective assertions are crucial parts of the plot. They induce changes in the characters and function as reference points that mark crucial points in the progress of the plot. Professional practice ensures that seemingly elementary information such as this is always pointed up in performance and physical production.

Plans and Commands

Plans and commands are statements requiring an outcome. They aim to cause or prevent an action by a character or characters. When someone says, "Turn down the music" or "Read the message" or "After work, let's go to a restaurant and then see a movie," they are making someone perform or abstain from a particular action or set

of actions. When internal action is expressed openly in the dialogue, it appears in two forms: commands and plans.

Commands

A command is a statement intended to make a character do or avoid doing something. “Silence!” The following examples demonstrate different kinds of commands.

Claudius employs his kingly authority when he commands Hamlet to leave for England.

CLAUDIUS. Hamlet, this deed, for thine especial
safety—
Which we do tender, as we dearly grieve
For that which thou hast done—must send
thee hence
With fiery quickness. Therefore prepare
thyself;
The bark is ready, and the wind at help,
Th’ associates tend, and everything is bent
For England.

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Orgon takes advantage of his paternal authority when he commands his daughter, Mariane, to marry Tartuffe.

ORGON. What have you to say about our guest
Tartuffe?
MARIANE. What have I to say?
ORGON. Yes, you! Mind how you answer.
MARIANE. Oh dear! I’ll say anything you like
about him.
ORGON. That’s very sensible. Then let me hear
you say, my dear, that he is a wonderful
man, that you love him, and you’d be glad
to have me choose him for your husband. Eh?

Commands together with the next topic, plans, develop the elementary storyline, pushing the action forward by creating events the characters must strive to carry out. “Driving characters” are those strong-willed characters who produce the plans and commands necessary to advance the plot.

Plans

A plan is a detailed method developed in advance for doing something. Some plans are simple, as in "First we'll meet at Mike's apartment, then we'll go to the movies." Or they may be more elaborate, with intricate sets of dependent actions leading to a final goal, like the plans for landing on the moon. Plans in the dialogue are the principal means for advancing the plot and are ever-present in plays. Notice the difference between plans, which will materialize in the plot by their very nature, and wish-dreams, which are ridiculous notions, hopes, or reveries that probably will never turn out. As the following examples show, plays make use of plans in many different situations.

An illustration of a direct and straightforward plan occurs in *Mother Courage* when Anna Fierling decides to hide the platoon's cash box. She plans to protect her son from being accused of the theft.

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MOTHER COURAGE. I'd better get the cash box out of here, I've found a hiding place. All right, get me a drink. (KATRIN goes behind the wagon.) I'll hide it in the rabbit hole down by the river until I can take it away. Maybe late tonight. I'll go get it and take it to the regiment.

Hamlet's well-known soliloquy also describes a plan that promises to have weighty consequences. An event in the background story sets up the plan.

HAMLET. I have heard
That guilty creatures, sitting at a play,
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaim'd their malefactions;
I'll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks;
I'll tent him to the quick. If a do blench,
I know my course.
The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the
King.

In *The Wild Duck* Gregers' suggestion to Hedvig proves to be a fatally misguided plan because it results in her death.

GREGERS. (*coming a little nearer*) But suppose you were to sacrifice *The Wild Duck* of your own free will for his sake?

HEDVIG. (*rising*) *The Wild Duck!*

GREGERS. Suppose you were to make a free-will offering, for his sake, of the dearest treasure you have in the world?

HEDVIG. Do you think that would do any good?

GREGERS. Try it, Hedvig.

HEDVIG. (*softly, with flashing eyes*) Yes, I will try it.

GREGERS. Have you really the courage for it, do you think?

HEDVIG. I'll ask grandfather to shoot *The Wild Duck* for me.

GREGERS. Yes, do. But not a word to your mother about it.

HEDVIG. Why, not?

GREGERS. She doesn't understand us.

HEDVIG. *The Wild Duck!* I'll try it tomorrow morning.

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Here is part of the comically disorganized plan for stealing the rare Buffalo-head nickel in *American Buffalo*.

TEACH. Can we get started? Do you want to tell me something about coins?
(*Pause.*)

DON. What about 'em?

TEACH. A crash course. What to look for. What to take. What to *not* take. (... *this* they can trace) (*that* isn't worth nothing ...).
(*Pause.*)

What looks like what but it's more valuable ... so on ...

DON. First off, I want the [rare Buffalo-head] nickel back.

TEACH. Donny ...

DON. No, I know it's only a fuckin' nickel ... I mean big deal, huh? But what I'm saying is I only want it back.

TEACH. You're going to get it back. I'm going in there for his coins, what am I going to take 'em all except your nickel? Wake up.

Plans are productive internal actions in the dialogue to study because they appear openly in the dialogue as plans and thereby provide a direct and straightforward engine for the plot.

External and Internal Action in the Dialogue of Nonrealistic Plays

External Action

Nonrealistic plays come into their full potential in their use of external actions. Since realistic plausibility is not an issue, the multiplicity of physical production features and special activities imaginable in nonrealistic plays is theoretically limitless. Almost anything that illustrates the theme is likely to happen.

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In episode one of *Machinal*, the Telephone Girl, Adding Clerk, Filing Clerk, and Stenographer perform as mechanical dolls when they ridicule Helen for arriving late to work. This special activity highlights the dominating dehumanization of the special world of the play.

TELEPHONE GIRL. You're late.

FILING CLERK. You're late.

ADDING CLERK. You're late.

STENOGRAPHER. And yesterday!

FILING CLERK. The day before.

ADDING CLERK. And the day before.

STENOGRAPHER. You'll lose your job.

HELEN. No!

STENOGRAPHER. No?

(Workers exchange glances.)

HELEN. I can't!

STENOGRAPHER. You can't?

(Same business.)

FILINGCLERK. Rent-bills-install-ments-miscellaneous.

ADDING CLERK. A dollar ten-ninety-five-\$3.
40-35¢-\$12.60.

The few hand properties in *Happy Days* appear to be ordinary, but in this nonrealistic play, they assume explicit thematic significance. Winnie's roomy handbag and Willie's bowler hat are symbolic of their bourgeois manner, habits, and, more important, their dreams. Winnie's permanent embedment in a mound of earth is undoubtedly an impressive element of physical production, and Willie's presence, though mostly hidden, is still a special activity of a kind that intensifies his physical action and its meaning. Super-careful reading is necessary to comprehend the thematic issues behind these examples of blocking, special activities, and physical production—intentionally subtle matters that lie beyond immediate recognition.

The special activities in *Fefu and Her Friends* begin with a shooting:

FEFU. (*Walks to the French doors. Beckoning CHRISTINA.*) Pst! (*FEFU gets the gun as CHRISTINA goes to the French doors.*) You haven't met Phillip. Have you?

CHRISTINA. No.

FEFU. That's him.

CHRISTINA. Which one?

FEFU. (*Aims and shoots.*) That one!

(*CHRISTINA and CINDY scream. FEFU smiles proudly. She blows on the mouth of the barrel. She puts down the gun and looks out again.*)

CINDY. Christ, Fefu.

FEFU. There he goes. He's up. It's a game we play. I shoot and he falls. Whenever he hears the blast he falls. No matter where he is he falls. One time he fell in a puddle of mud and his clothes were a mess. (*She looks out.*) It's not too bad. He's just dusting off some stuff. (*She waves to PHILLIP and starts to go upstairs.*) He's all right. Look.

Later on, the characters—all educated, articulate, adult women—engage in a juvenile water fight. Julia, who uses a wheelchair from a mysterious hunting accident, appears in a featureless room with leaves on the floor and suffers from hallucinations that insult her gender. Later on, she walks without her wheelchair and materializes before a frightened Fefu. At the end of the play, Fefu shoots at a rabbit offstage,

killing both it and—puzzlingly—Julia as well. These and other special activities in *Fefu and Her Friends* have perplexed many critics, but a close reading reveals they are written to express the thematic issue at the heart of the play—mistaken ideals—a thematic concern that needs to be identified and theatricalized.

In *A Lie of the Mind*, Jake undergoes special activities in the form of nonrealistic “transformations.” He alternates between two different personalities—one childlike and kind, the other mean-spirited and brutish. These transformations are not explained in the dialogue. They happen without attempting to hide behind realistic plausibility. At one point between scenes, Jake travels on foot from Oklahoma to Montana, wearing only his underwear and his father’s Air Force flight jacket, and wrapped in an American flag. At the end of the play, he forsakes his wife and bestows her on his brother, Frankie. At the same time, her mother and father ceremoniously fold that American flag.

At one moment the action may be realistically plausible; at another, the characters are pushed into nonrealistic adjustments; at another a mysterious unplanned impulse will arise, while another episode will be seen through the fun-house mirror of parody. All this may happen with any immediately plausible justifications. Shifting viewpoints like this is a way of seeing another, fresher reality alongside the expected one.

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Internal Action

Internal action in nonrealistic plays often seems trifling, enigmatic, repetitive, or contrary to the rules of common sense. As with special activities, the nature and variety of examples depend on the theme as viewed through the lens of the playwright’s imagination.

In *The Birthday Party*, various internal actions hint at mysterious crimes and misdemeanors, emotional anxieties, and pointed insults, which further suggest something beyond the realistic externals of the play. The mysteries begin with Stanley’s emphatic questioning (commanding) of Meg when she informs him that two visitors will be arriving at the seaside boarding house. The purpose behind choosing these extended passages of dialogue is explained ahead.

MEG. I’ve got to get things in for the two gentlemen.

(A pause. STANLEY slowly raises his head.
He speaks without turning.)

STANLEY. What two gentlemen?

MEG. I'm expecting visitors.
(He turns.)

STANLEY. What?

MEG. You didn't know that, did you?

STANLEY. What are you talking about?

MEG. Two gentlemen asked Petey [her husband] if they could come and stay for a couple of nights. I'm expecting them.

STANLEY. I don't believe it.

MEG. It's true.

STANLEY. *(moving to her)* You're saying it on purpose.

MEG. Petey told me this morning.

STANLEY. *(grinding out his cigarette)* When was this? When did he see them?

MEG. Last night.

STANLEY. Who are they?

MEG. I don't know.

STANLEY. Didn't he tell you their names?

MEG. No.

STANLEY. *(pacing the room)* Here? They wanted to come here?

MEG. Yes, they did.

STANLEY. Why?

MEG. This house is on the [approved] list.

STANLEY. But who are they? I mean, why ...?

MEG. You'll see when they come.

STANLEY. *(decisively)* They won't come.

MEG. Why not?

STANLEY. *(quickly)* I tell you they won't come. Why didn't they come last night, if they were coming?

MEG. Perhaps they couldn't find the place in the dark. It's not easy to find in the dark.

STANLEY. They won't come. Someone's teasing you. Forget all about it. It's a false alarm. A false alarm.

Why is Stanley so forcefully curious about the unidentified visitors? His mood changes when he learns about them, and he becomes anxious and overbearing. Later, when Goldberg and McCann meet up with Stanley, an everyday exchange of pleasantries morphs into a series of menacing commands by McCann.

McCANN *is sitting at the table tearing a sheet of newspaper into five equal strips. It is evening. After a few moments STANLEY enters. He stops upon seeing McCANN, and watches him. He then walks towards the kitchen, and speaks.)*

STANLEY. Evening.

McCANN. Evening.

(Chuckles are heard from outside the back door, which is open.)

STANLEY. Very warm tonight. *(He turns towards the back door, and back.)* Someone out there? *(McCANN tears another length of paper. STANLEY goes into the kitchen and pours a glass of water. He drinks it looking through the hatch. He puts the glass down, comes out of the kitchen and walks quickly towards the door, left. McCANN rises and intercepts him.)*

McCANN. I don't think we've met.

STANLEY. No, we haven't.

McCANN. My name's McCann.

STANLEY. Staying here long?

McCANN. Not long. What's your name?

STANLEY. Webber.

McCANN. I'm glad to meet you, sir. *(He offers his hand. STANLEY takes it, and McCANN holds the grip.)* Many happy returns of the day. *(STANLEY withdraws his hand. They face each other.)* Were you going out?

STANLEY. Yes.

McCANN. On your birthday?

STANLEY. Yes. Why not?

McCANN. But they're holding a party for you here tonight.

STANLEY. Oh, really? That's unfortunate.

McCANN. Ah no. It's very nice.

(Voices from outside the door.)

STANLEY. I'm sorry. I'm not in the mood for a party tonight.

McCANN. Oh, is that so? I'm sorry.

STANLEY. Yes, I'm going out to celebrate quietly, on my own.

McCANN. That's a shame.

Stanley's unexpected curiosity in the first passage and McCann's quiet persistence in the second show how simple questions can become threatening commands in selected nonrealistic circumstances. Several features give these passages their characteristic "Pinteresque" (vaguely ominous) atmosphere.

The first feature is unexpected repetition. Under ordinary conditions, two visitors arriving at a boarding house would not cause any particular concern. But here twenty-eight lines are devoted to affirming the simple question of their arrival. Stanley's excessive talk is the clue. The conversation of two guests talking about a birthday party for one of them likewise extends beyond expected length.

The second feature is extended passages of trivial conversation. The characters talk about simple everyday things and repeat clichés ("That's a shame," "It's very nice," "I don't believe it," etc.) with unexpectedly deep philosophical earnestness.

The third feature is simple physical activities performed with unwarranted seriousness. McCann is methodically "tearing apart" the newspaper, presumably to soothe his nerves, but the implied threat of violence does not escape Stanley's notice. As soon as Stanley spots McCann, he goes into the kitchen for "a glass of water" (to regain his composure). A few moments later, McCann grips Stanley's hand past the expected time limit (a threat) for a normal handshake. *The Birthday Party* is about abuse of power, and the commands here are examples of that power in action. Furthermore, the fact that the commands are delivered behind a façade of innocent conversation makes the abuse of power even more worrisome to contemplate. These passages of internal action are object lessons about the ways that routine commands and plans in nonrealistic plays can be transformed for thematic ends.

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Summary

Plot means an account of connected events. **External action in the dialogue** refers to statements about entrances and exits, blocking, physical production, and special activities. **Entrances and exits in the dialogue** change the numerical composition of characters on stage, thus stopping the ongoing action and starting a new action. **Blocking in the dialogue** is the movement and positioning of the characters on stage. **Physical production in the dialogue** refers to elements of scenery, costumes, lighting, properties, sound, and makeup used by or referred to by the characters. **Special activities in the dialogue** are goings-on outside those typically found in a play; that is, beyond

standing, sitting, eating, drinking, smoking, walking, talking, arriving, and departing, etc. **Internal action in the dialogue** appears in the form of effective assertions, plans, and commands. An **effective assertion in the dialogue** is a statement of fact that produces a change in the characters and the course of the action. A **command** is a statement intended to make a character do or avoid doing something. A **plan** is a detailed method developed in advance for doing something.

Exercises for a Scene or Short Play

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1. **External Action in the Dialogue.** Search for entrances and exits and explain their function in the development of the plot and configuration of the physical production. Search for blocking or other types of character positioning stated in the dialogue and explain their function in the development of the plot and configuration of the physical production. Search for any use of or reference to physical production in the dialogue and describe its purpose in the development of the plot and configuration of the physical production. Search for any special activities in the dialogue and explain their use in the development of the plot and configuration of the physical production.
2. **Internal Action in the Dialogue.** Search for commands in the dialogue and define their role in the development of the plot and configuration of the physical production. Search for any plans for doing something and explain their function in the development of the plot and configuration of the physical production.
3. **Following Action Analysis.** Search for the play's seed latent within the external and internal actions. Explain how the seed influences those external and internal actions and the configuration of the physical production.

Plot

Progressions and Structure

Dramatic Actions in a Particular Order

Plays are written to create the impression that things are moving ahead, that they are going somewhere. Forward motion is a fundamental necessity of plot. By this, we do not always mean a chronological movement but sometimes a psychological or even a thematic one. Even in a play with seemingly negligible external action, like *Three Sisters*, perhaps, or *American Buffalo*, the plot is always advancing. The feeling of progress comes from the dramatist's method of making the next event more significant than the last. We are uncomfortable when forward movement in the play flags or if there is a feeling of too much repetition. We are not even satisfied to maintain the same level of interest.

However, a plot does not progress at the same rate throughout the entire play. That would be almost as uninteresting as no forward motion at all. What happens is this: a dramatic action is introduced and developed to a peak of tension, and then a new dramatic action is added, which begins to grow toward another peak. Emotional intensity may suspend for a moment at the peak, but interest will not fade because a further dramatic action will immediately emerge and start moving toward another peak. A play runs forward in cycles of dramatic action, which rise, crest, and fall away like waves at the seashore.

Progressions

Progressions are pieces of dramatic action with a beginning, middle, and end. In literature, progressions are called paragraphs,

sections, chapters, and books. In drama, progressions are called beats, units, scenes, acts, and, of course, plays as such. In fact, each sentence has its own built-in progression: subject⇒verb⇒object. The study of progressions in drama begins by understanding how a play arranges itself into a chain of storytelling pieces of dramatic action. Following this understanding, it becomes possible to determine the logic connecting them, and out of this process, the plot and its forward motion may begin to become apparent.

Alas, we are so accustomed to seeing dialogue flow uninterrupted on the page that we may not realize how grouping by progressions helps our understanding. Nevertheless, the effect of dialogue without progressions would be like a passage of prose without paragraphs, sections, or chapters. It would be almost impossible to make sense of a continuous river of dialogue undivided into progressions. Disregarding progressions means always having to deal with many, many independent lines of dialogue. Script analysis identifies progressions and forces them into the open so that actors, directors, and designers can communicate them in performance and physical production.

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Progressions are indispensable features of playwriting and as such exist objectively in the script. Ideally, different readers analyzing the same play should arrive at roughly the same pattern of progressions. Even though progressions are objectively present in the text, however, it is easy to become confused when trying to identify them. Progressions are there for a specific reason, but playwrights are skillful and inventive artists. Even though successful playwrights try to ensure that their subject is always clear, many of them may disguise what is happening to a certain extent. After all, plays are meant to be art, not science. Readers should make allowances for progressions that aim at artistic effects where the playwright's objective is to keep the audience (though hopefully not the practitioners) guessing, for the sake of suspense or delayed surprise, for example. Even when playwrights do not try to conceal their handiwork, learning about progressions may still be frustrating initially. It is natural to experience confusion in the beginning because learning to recognize progressions takes practice. Readers should try not to become trapped in endless mental gymnastics about this issue, but make an educated guess, then move ahead and test the results at rehearsal.

Since progressions are also related to character, some readers may worry that we do not discuss character objectives and actions at this point in the book. The principal reason is for learning. This chapter treats the external storytelling function of progressions, first by identifying them and then by studying their storytelling features. Some

of the descriptions used at this point are not actions or objectives in a sense employed by Stanislavsky and his followers. Discussion of plot alone does not always require the use of Stanislavsky's vocabulary for analyzing characters. A reasonable explanation of the external actions of the characters is satisfactory at present and saves time. The next chapter will consider how progressions also have features that influence the characters. There is no pressing need to stay with this learning strategy. Readers who wish to study character objectives and actions before learning about beats and units can read ahead for that information, and then return to this chapter later on.

Beats

A beat is the smallest progression, the smallest piece of dramatic action. Typically, a beat involves about half a dozen lines of dialogue, but many are longer or shorter, and some contain only physical or psychological action with little or no dialogue. Beats work like paragraphs in prose, but without indentations as visible identification marks. The purpose of beats is identical to that of paragraphs, namely to introduce, develop, and conclude a single brief topic that adds to the progress and development of the play. The length, internal arrangement, and purpose of beats vary according to the playwright's intentions and the event at hand.

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To understand beats, we will look at the opening moments of David Mamet's play, *American Buffalo*. It's morning at Don's resale shop in Chicago. The play begins in the middle of a scene between Bob and Don. Play scripts do not openly identify beats, so we have defined them here with a dotted line marked through the dialogue. Marking beats in some way is a useful practice to pin them down. As a further point, studying the words of one character at a time can make the topics of conversation and their associated beats easier to recognize.

Beat 1-----

DON. So?

(Pause.)

So what, Bob?

(Pause.)

BOB. I'm sorry, Donny.

(Pause.)

DON. All right.

BOB. I'm sorry, Donny.
DON. Yeah.

Beat 2-----

BOB. Maybe he's still in there.
DON. If you think that, Bob, how come you're in here?
BOB. I came in.
(Pause.)
DON. You don't come in, Bob. You don't come in until you do a thing.
BOB. He didn't come out.
DON. What do I care, Bob, if he came out or not? You're s'posed to watch the guy, you watch him. Am I wrong?
BOB. I just went to the back.
DON. Why?
(Pause.)
Why did you do that?
BOB. 'Cause he wasn't coming out the front.

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This passage consists of two beats. We have said that a crucial storytelling function of beats is the disclosure of a specific topic. In the first beat, the topic is Bob's apology. The beat rises to a small peak when Don says, "All right," and ends when he says "Yeah." It consists of five lines.

The second beat begins with Bob's line, "Maybe he's still in there." Bob justifies his behavior, and Don shows him where he went wrong. He specifies this in his line "You're s'posed to watch the guy." The beat lasts for nine lines.

To summarize the topics of these two beats:

Beat 1: Don reprimands Bob

Beat 2: Don instructs Bob

There may be other ways to describe these two beats, but the reasons for choosing these descriptions should be clear at any rate. Notice this crucial feature, almost a law of dramatic writing: in each beat, the characters speak about one specific topic, and after finishing that topic, there is no longer any need to talk about it. The characters may discuss other issues related to the original topic, but they will never repeat the topic in the same way or with the same intention. Without this economy, the dialogue we have just studied would have

a negligent, unfinished feeling about it, at least in terms of standard dramatic writing.

Units

Beats follow each other without a break but are not lined up end to end without connections. They work together with one another in the development of more substantial progressions called units. While a beat is a group of related lines, **a unit is a group of connected beats**. Compare beats with musical measures (groups of related notes) and units with musical phrases (groups of related measures). What distinguishes beats from units is their relative size and influence in a play. A unit is more significant and more contributory because it contains several beats; that is to say, more information.

Some writers maintain a distinction between units and beats as we do here, while others use the two terms interchangeably. Can these two points of view be reconciled? It is helpful to look at the historical picture to clarify this question. Following the practice of the Russian Formalist critics, Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko employed the procedure of subdividing a play into its component pieces. Stanislavsky explained the process in *An Actor's Work* (aka *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character*), where, in the Russian edition, he spoke of these subdivisions as *kouski*, literally bits or pieces. He did not make any further size distinctions except to speak of large pieces (*bolshiye kouski*), medium pieces (*sredniye kouski*), and small pieces (*malyenkiye kouski*). In the first English translation of *An Actor Prepares*, Elizabeth Hapgood designated the more substantial pieces as units and the smaller pieces as bits. According to Hapgood, the word *beat* first appeared when Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya (the earliest Russian teachers of Stanislavsky's system in America) used her English terms but mispronounced the word bit as "beet" since there is no "ih" sound in Russian speech. American actors heard the word "beat" and naturally associated it with the musical term, to which it bears some resemblance. In any case, Stanislavsky was interested in the more substantial progressions (units), and Hapgood's English names were chosen to represent his viewpoint.

So, it is necessary to learn to divide a role into pieces from large to small. However, when a role is divided into small pieces, when it is chopped up like a mosaic, there is a compulsion to live by every piece separately. In that case, it can be tough for an actor to begin to experience the big picture; that is, to be impregnated with the play's general

feeling (see Through-Action in Chapter 1). The lesson here is that a small number of large progressions is more useful for performance than a large number of small progressions. The division of the play and role into beats is done only as a temporary measure and carried out mainly during preparatory work.

To explain units, we will study the remaining beats that make up the first unit of *American Buffalo*.

Beat 3-----

DON. Well, Bob, I'm sorry, but this isn't good enough. If you want to do business ... if we got a business deal, it isn't good enough. I want you to remember this.

BOB. I do.

DON. Yeah, *now* ... but later, what?

(Pause.)

Just one thing, Bob. Action counts.

(Pause.)

Action walks and bullshit talks.

Beat 4-----

BOB. I'm sorry.

DON. Don't tell me that you're sorry. I'm not mad at you.

BOB. You're not?

DON. (Pause.) Let's clean up here.

Beat 3 contains three lines. It consists of Don's lesson for Bob and concludes with a "street" maxim, "Action walks and bullshit talks." Beat 4 ends the episode with four lines in which Bob acknowledges his mistake. The line following the pause ("Let's clean up here.") begins the next beat as well as the next unit.

The focus of the unit is Bob's mistake and Don's lesson for him. In outline form, the composition of the unit is as follows:

Unit 1: Don warns Bob about his mistake

Beat 1: Don reprimands Bob

Beat 2: Don instructs Bob

Beat 3: Don cautions Bob

Beat 4: Don reinforces the lesson for Bob

Readers can draw a further lesson from the fact that the unit studied here ends with a decisive physical action (Don and Bob start to clean up the debris around the poker table), although this may not happen in all cases.

There may be disagreement about the exact wording used in this summary. Some of the beats, for example, may not be considered actions or objectives in the strict sense of Stanislavsky, but merely loose descriptions of the events. However, this summary should make the fundamental principle at stake understandable. Each beat has a distinct identity, and it also interacts with other beats in the logical development of its enclosing unit, which itself is different from other units. Moreover, everything connects to a single topic: Bob's mistake.

Moving ahead in the script, four units of action take place before Teach arrives at the shop:

Unit 1: Don reproaches Bob for failing to do his job

Unit 2: Don praises Fletcher as an example for Bob to follow

Unit 3: Don corrects Bob's false impression of Fletcher

Unit 4: Don advises Bob against his unhealthy eating habits

The topics of conversation show Don in his self-appointed role as Bob's mentor. Once more, because units have no evident identification marks or fixed length and seldom have a clear indication of any physical activity, they are not always instantly apparent in the dialogue. Identifying them can be challenging, if not laborious, but the effort is sure to enhance the logic and clarity of the performance and physical production.

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Scenes

A scene is a group of units marked by a change of time or place. Moreover, its units relate to each other in such a way that a scene duplicates on a reduced scale the structure of a complete play. Scenes are popular choices for acting and directing classes as well as design projects: they are miniature, self-contained plays, with a beginning, middle, and end. A scene is similar to a unit since its action is continuous and its locale is constant, but a scene is composed of several units and is, therefore, longer and more substantial than a unit. A scene's ending is typically stronger and more decisive, and its consequences are more significant than those of a unit. While many plays formally mark the beginnings and endings of scenes, others do not.

Greek tragedies contain no formal scene divisions, but scenes are identified by alternating choral odes and episodes.

Reading seventeenth-century French plays by Pierre Corneille, Jean Racine, and Molière, there would seem to be dozens of formal scenes in each act. It was the convention of that era to consider a new scene each time a character enters or exits. Hence, a **French Scene is a new arrangement of characters on stage as indicated by an entrance or exit**. Modern plays tend to “hold the situation” longer than historical and classic plays did to provide sufficient uninterrupted time for psychological exploration. Therefore, modern plays tend to contain fewer events than their historical counterparts. This practice results in fewer formal scenes and more extended individual scenes, but it does not do away with the need for entrances and exits. French Scenes continue to be used for convenient rehearsal scheduling and information about blocking and physical production.

American Buffalo is a good case in point to learn about French Scenes. Each act is one continuous scene given that the entire play takes place in a single locale (Don’s resale shop) and the time within each act is continuous. And yet each act can be divided into French Scenes with entrances and exits. To understand this, we will look at Act 1, which contains seven French Scenes.

The subject of the act as a whole is the pending theft of rare coins. In the first French Scene, Don grouses at Bob for messing up their plans for the theft. Then Teach arrives to complain about an associate’s lack of professionalism, while Bob goes for coffee. Next, Teach and Don grumble about their meager incomes recently. After that, Bob returns and briefs Don about the man with the rare coins and then goes back to the restaurant for some missing items. In the fifth French Scene, Teach interrogates Don about the robbery plan, which Teach was unaware of. In the next French Scene, Don removes Bob from the robbery plan under pressure from Teach. The seventh French Scene consists of Teach and Don planning the robbery for that evening. Briefly sketched out, the French Scenes in Act 1 look like this:

Act 1 French Scenes:

1. Bob and Don (Don warns Bob against making any mistakes on the job)
2. Bob, Don, and Teach (Teach complains about Ruthie, and Bob goes for coffee)
3. Don and Teach (Bob and Teach complain about their meager takings)

4. Don, Teach, and Bob (Bob brings news to Don about their pending robbery)
5. Don and Teach (Teach probes Don about the job and warns against using Bob)
6. Don, Teach, and Bob (Don releases Bob from his part in the planned robbery)
7. Don and Teach (Don and Teach plan the theft)

Readers should be able to grasp the logic and economy of Act 1 as its action develops through these seven French Scenes. Each French Scene has its particular storytelling topic, and though they are all related, no single topic is overworked in the planning for the pending robbery.

Acts

Acts are the primary and most substantial progressions of a play. Roman author Horace (65–8 BCE) was the first to identify acts as primary divisions of a play. He based his thinking on the divisions of action found in classical Greek tragedies (typically five episodes). Shakespeare did not arrange his plays into acts (that was done by literary scholars much later); however, a number of his plays seem to divide themselves inherently into five parts. The practice of writing plays in four or three acts developed during the nineteenth century, and at present full-length plays with two or even one act have become widespread. Whatever the reasons and despite the evident historical trend, the impulse to subdivide a play into large, co-dependent pieces of action has not gone away.

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The next logical step with *American Buffalo* is to assemble the related French Scenes into acts. Since we have already described the analytical process, we can pass over the in-between explanations and merely collect the French Scenes together within their enclosing acts. At this point in analyzing progressions, the details are suppressed and events described in broad terms to see the big picture. Once again, there is no need to be concerned with verbal nuances here, only with defining the apparent progress of the plot.

Act 1: (Morning) Don allows Teach to supervise the robbery

1. Don and Bob (Don warns Bob against making any mistakes on the job)
2. Don, Bob, and Teach (Teach complains about Ruthie and Bob goes for coffee)

3. Don and Teach (Bob and Teach complain about their meager takings)
4. Don, Teach, and Bob (Bob briefs Don with news about their pending robbery)
5. Don and Teach (Teach probes Don about the job and warns against using Bob)
6. Don, Teach, and Bob (Don releases Bob from his part in the planned robbery)
7. Don and Teach (Don and Teach plan the theft)

Act 2: (11:15 that evening) Don realizes Teach is a fraud

1. Don and Bob (Bob arrives and asks Don to buy a rare coin)
2. Don, Bob, and Teach (Teach arrives and insists that Bob must leave)
3. Don and Teach (Teach instructs Don how they will carry out the robbery)
4. Don, Teach, and Bob (Bob brings news about Fletcher and Teach strikes him fatally)
5. Don and Bob (Bob apologizes, and Don looks after him)

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After studying the entire play, it becomes clear that the focal point of its meaning is Don. The play is the story of a person betrayed by his misguided ideals. Don respected Teach because he believed him to be a criminal expert as well as a mentor and friend but, to his dismay, Don came to realize that Teach was just a brutal, ignorant thug. Unfortunately, the injury and probable death of his troubled protégé, Bob, was the price Don had to pay for this lesson.

Notice how each French Scene illustrates one step in Don's descent from self-confident mentor to a grief-stricken friend and chump. It is important to point out here how logical and economical all the progressions are, which is the result of Mamet's skillful writing. Readers should be able to understand the thinking behind these French Scene descriptions even though they may not agree with them in every case. Acts are coherent groups of related formal scenes and French Scenes. Each individual scene contributes to its enclosing act, just as each unit adds to its enclosing scene, and each beat to its enclosing unit.

Digressions

Digressions are events that deviate, or seem to, from the forward movement of the plot. They have no apparent influence on the main

storyline. As such, digressions appear in many plays. Nonrealistic plays make extensive use of them (see below), but for the moment we are concerned with their presence in historical and realistic plays. The choral odes in *Oedipus Rex* are a good example. In classic Greek drama, the odes (lyric poems) sung and danced by the chorus are not part of the story itself, but digressions intended to reinforce thematic issues in the play. We accept the odes without question because they are intelligible pauses in the action with a recognizable logic of their own. *Hamlet* contains digressions, too, in the form of soliloquies, but sometimes in other ways as well. Hamlet's "advice to the players" (3,2) and the initial episode in the graveyard scene (5,1) are digressions in a sense intended here. We accept them as convincing breaks in the story because they foreground specific thematic issues at stake. Other examples of digressions are the songs, card games, dreamy reveries, and lengthy monologues distributed throughout *The Lower Depths*; the dinner party in Act 1 of *The Wild Duck*; Cleante's defense of religious tolerance in *Tartuffe*; and the gossip episode in 1,1 of *The School for Scandal*. The poetic history lessons and Wining Boy's conversation with the ghost of the yellow dog at the railway station are digressions in *The Piano Lesson*. All these examples are considered digressions because they deviate from or delay the progress of the plot. Nonetheless, their thematic implications make them plausible, and we tend to accept them on that basis.

Formalist analysis arises from the premise that plays are unified works of art; that what unifies plays is their main idea, which controls and directs everything toward itself. And that by this means everything in a play serves its main idea (called the theme in Chapter 1). What makes the digressions in historical and realistic plays plausible is the ability of the playwright to "smooth them out" by skillfully connecting them with the main idea. Actors, directors, and designers use comparable means in performance and physical production where digressions are fine-tuned to highlight the main idea. Correspondence with the main idea is so important in realistic and classic plays that Stanislavsky devoted part of a chapter to the issue in *An Actor's Work*. Perhaps referencing the numerous monologues in *The Lower Depths*, he warns against the "dangerous phenomenon" of interrupting the main idea with "minor tasks" (digressions) that could "distort" the main idea of the play. "When you force [emphasize] topical elements [digressions] or some other [seemingly] extraneous goal into a play," he says, "it's like a canker on a beautiful body and often deforms it beyond recognition." The play becomes "crippled." Stanislavsky proposes that such digressions should be "grafted" onto the main idea so

that they “cease to exist independently” and re-emerge in a way that makes the main idea stronger (2008: 316–318).

The lesson here is that to produce a play, in particular a realistic or historical play, actors, directors, and designers should not be content until they have exposed the main idea latent in everything, including any supposed digressions from the plot—not just as a “concept” to attach to a production like icing on a cake, but a main idea to which every zigzag in the action, every implication, and every digression is inescapably connected. Once the main idea is identified, then all the bits and pieces and digressions need to relate to it so unmistakably that it really is a main idea and not just a primitive notion from which digressions and other features hang loosely with no support from within the play itself. Even then, of course, finding the main idea and subordinating to it everything including the digressions is no assurance of a successful production. However, it does eliminate lots of possible mistakes. Chapter 7 will discuss the main idea and its associated features in more detail.

Structure

Structure is the arrangement of the parts of the play and their relationship to each other and the whole play. Just as literary critics sometimes speak of the gestalt, or unified pattern, of an entire work, we consider the arrangement of beats, units, scenes, and acts as forming the structure of a play. The main difference in structure from one play to the next is in the arrangement and relative emphasis devoted to each of these parts.

Some drama textbooks suggest the structure of the plot consists of rising action, climax, and falling action. These terms come from the German dramatist and novelist Gustav Freytag (1816–1895), who represented the parts of a play as a pyramid, the so-called Freytag Pyramid (Freytag, 1900: 114). His inspiration was probably Horace, but in any case, according to Freytag’s way of thinking, plays consist of five distinct parts separated by three major climaxes (beginning, middle, end) in the following way:

1. Introduction (exposition)
 - a. First climax (inciting action)
2. Rising action
3. Climax (turning point)
 - a. Second climax

4. Falling action (return)
 - a. Third climax
5. Catastrophe (denouement or resolution)

Each of these parts may consist of several scenes or a single scene, but the principal climax-turning point, according to Freytag, is a single big scene somewhere in the middle of the play. Freytag points out that Shakespeare often used this type of pyramidal structure. In *Hamlet*, for example, he arranged what Freytag argues is the principal climax-turning point in the middle of a five-part structure. The first half of the play up to the principal climax-turning point shows Hamlet searching for conclusive proof of Claudius' guilt. Then, after the mousetrap scene, Hamlet sets in motion the second half of the play, which leads to the deaths of Ophelia, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Gertrude, Laertes, Claudius, and Hamlet himself.

Freytag described many accurate and useful playwriting fundamentals, but he was not always clear about his terms and definitions. Consequently, succeeding generations have adjusted his ideas in various ways to suit their needs. Despite the status of Freytag's views, however, no law of playwriting requires such an arrangement. A more accurate approach would be to consider the typical dramatic structure not as a symmetrical pyramid but rather as a line ascending upward at an angle, interrupted by one or more less important events in each act, and terminating with the most crucial event, followed by a feeling of closure. *Oedipus Rex*, *Tartuffe*, *The Lower Depths*, *Death of a Salesman*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, and *The Piano Lesson* are examples of plays with such uneven rising structures. Their main climax appears at or near the end of the final act. Certain nonrealistic plays, like *Machinal*, *Happy Days*, and perhaps *Top Girls*, employ a structure that is free of traditional climaxes, but more about this later. The structure of most historical and realistic plays reveals several high-tension climaxes whose placement varies from one work to another.

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Organization

First, some definitions. The terms linear, non-linear, causal, and epic each denote a different way of organizing a plot. A **linear plot begins at a certain point, moves through a series of events, and then ends up at another point.** A **non-linear plot (sometimes called disjointed, disarranged, or disrupted) does not follow a chronological path but may contain other plotlines, flashbacks, dreams, soliloquies, and narrated stories within the primary plot.** A non-linear

plot is thought to imitate the random structure of human consciousness. The terms linear and non-linear refer only to how scenes are presented, not how scenes may be interrelated. Causal and epic are terms that apply to how scenes are interconnected. **A causal or cause-and-effect plot is such that one or more scenes are the result of another or other scenes.** The term epic refers historically to a long poem narrating the adventures of legendary figures. In current theatre parlance, **epic refers to the kind of plot in which each scene is relatively self-contained and not necessarily the result of another or other scenes.** For example, "Character A died and then character B died of grief" are causally related events, whereas "Character A died, and character B died" are epic events since they are independent and self-contained. Plots may be organized according to any one or a combination of any of these methods.

Point of Attack

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The point of attack is the moment in time when the play begins in relation to the chronology of the background story. When the onstage action starts late in the chronology of the background story and extends through a relatively short dramatic time frame, the play is said to possess a late point of attack. *The Lower Depths* maintains such an arrangement. The onstage action shows the last days of a story that began many years earlier. A play with a late point of attack like *The Lower Depths* compresses a great deal of background story and onstage action into a short dramatic time frame. Because of this compression, plot freedom (the range and variety of onstage activities available to the playwright) is constrained by the need to narrate so much background story. *The Lower Depths* is a modern realistic play, but the use of a late point of attack is not restricted to the modern era or the style of realism. *Oedipus Rex*, *Tartuffe*, and *The School for Scandal* also demonstrate late points of attack.

Conversely, a play possesses an early point of attack when there is little background story and a long stretch of dramatic time between the opening curtain and final curtain. The background story of *Hamlet* begins a mere few weeks before the start of the play, while the onstage action covers several months. Once again, treatment of the point of attack is independent of the play's period or style. *Machinal*, *Mother Courage*, and *Angels in America* also have early points of attack. In these plays, there is potential for a longer time span and a broader available range of performable activities compared to plays with a late point of attack.

Primary Event

A **primary event** is a crucial event in the background story that produces the conditions necessary for the play to take place. Since the primary event is part of the background story, it is therefore narrated and not performed. Here are some examples of primary events from the study plays:

Oedipus Rex (a deadly plague descended on Thebes)

Hamlet (Claudius murdered King Hamlet)

The Wild Duck (Gregers' father became engaged to Mrs. Sorby)

Three Sisters (General Prozorov, the father of the three sisters, died exactly one year before)

The Lower Depths (Vaska Pepel, a young thief, starts an affair with Vassilisa Karpovna, the wife of the dosshouse owner, Mikhail Kostilyov)

Machinal (Mr. Jones decided to propose to the Young Woman)

Death of a Salesman (Biff was fired from his job for stealing)

The Birthday Party (Stanley was prevented from playing a concert)

American Buffalo (A stranger paid Don ninety dollars for a five-cent coin)

A Lie of the Mind (Jake murdered his drunken father)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (The title characters were summoned by a messenger from the King)

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Notice the prominence of life-changing events. Primary events are always powerful dramatic situations in themselves, but they are not always as recognizable as one might suppose. For example, consider the engagement of Gregers' father in *The Wild Duck* or Stanley's canceled piano concert in *The Birthday Party*. Nevertheless, primary events are crucial for generating the initial state of tension with which a play necessarily begins. They can also provide opportunities for rehearsal improvisations to implant the conditions of the play forcefully in the imaginations of the designers and performers.

Inciting Action

The **inciting action** is the onstage event that starts the primary conflict of the play. It occurs at that point in the play when something happens to the leading character that sets the primary conflict in motion. The inciting action then becomes the chief driving force, the "big bang," for all the following actions in the play. In *Hamlet*, the inciting action occurs in the fifth scene when the Ghost tells Hamlet

about the murder and challenges him to take revenge. The inciting action in *Oedipus Rex* occurs in the Prologue when Creon informs Oedipus of the Oracle's warning. In *The School for Scandal*, it happens in 1,2 when Sir Oliver Surface returns to London. In *The Lower Depths*, Mikhail Kostilyov discovers his wife in bed with Vaska Pepel. The inciting action of *The Piano Lesson* occurs at the moment when Boy Willie first appears. In *American Buffalo*, it happens when Teach arrives. The inciting action may take on different forms, but it always appears somewhere near the beginning of the play for the simple reason that it initiates the primary conflict. It may be an incident, an idea, a wish, a feeling, or a plan in someone's mind. In any case, the primary conflict can only begin after the inciting action takes place. It forms the transition between the initial given circumstances and the body of the play, and its placement in the overall structure helps to shape the total composition of the play.

Conflict

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The dictionary defines conflict as incompatibility or interference, as of one idea, desire, event, or activity with another. On the stage as in real life, all planned human behavior encounters conflict as it tries to reach a goal. Characters meet up with those who have opposing desires, or they run into opposing events, or they may even question their motives and intentions. **Conflict here refers to the counter-movements in the plot created by opposing motives and events.** An axiom is a proposition that is established, accepted, and self-evidently true, and conflict is an axiom of drama. Conflict produces the rising and falling levels of tension in the play, allowing the plot to thicken and become more complicated, and the internal tensions to emerge. Different parts of the play begin to connect, and it feels like the play is moving ahead.

Conflicts require the presence of two basics: (1) obstacles and (2) complications. **An obstacle is something that blocks or delays the progress of a character's goal.** Obstacles motivate characters and advance the story, but it makes little difference in what they are as such. They can be nonspecific or left open to interpretation, such as the city of Moscow (*Three Sisters*), a character's hands (*Machinal*), an executive promotion (*Top Girls*), or a hunting accident (*Fefu and Her Friends*). Frequently obstacles are physical objects, such as an insurance check (*A Raisin in the Sun*), an old coin (*American Buffalo*), or a piano (*The Piano Lesson*). The physical obstacle in some films

is humorously called the MacGuffin, as, for instance, the famous Maltese Falcon in the movie of the same name, or the One Ring in *The Lord of the Rings*. Whatever the obstacle may be, its vital importance is accepted without question by the characters. Obstacles, in turn, create **complications, the unexpected changes in existing plans, methods, or attitudes that make a situation more difficult to deal with**. Without obstacles and complications, there might be a potential for conflict, but there would be no chance for that conflict to occur.

To explain obstacles and complications, we will review the conflicts found in 1,1 of *A Raisin in the Sun*. The action takes place in the living room of the Youngers' small apartment on Chicago's South Side, a low-income, African-American neighborhood. It is Friday morning and, as everyone knows, Friday is paycheck day. On stage are Walter Younger, Jr., his wife and son, and his mother and sister. Below each numbered conflict are listed its related obstacle and complication.

1. Conflict: Ruth objects to Walter's scheme to buy a liquor store with his father's life insurance *money*.
 - a. Obstacle: insurance *money*
 - b. Complication: Walter has to persuade his wife to let him have the insurance *money* now.
2. Conflict: Ruth disapproves of Walter's *friends*.
 - a. Obstacle: Walter's *friends*
 - b. Complication: Walter has to justify the irresponsible behavior of his *friends*.
3. Conflict: Ruth refuses to give Travis an extra *fifty cents* (money) for school.
 - a. Obstacle: *fifty cents*
 - b. Complication: Walter has to deal with being an *unsuccessful provider* before his son.
4. Conflict: Ruth objects to Walter's lengthy *unemployment*.
 - a. Obstacle: *unemployment*
 - b. Complication: Walter has to justify his continued *unemployment*.
5. Conflict: Walter objects to Beneatha's (costly) *aspiration* to become a doctor.
 - a. Obstacle: dreams (*aspirations*)
 - b. Complication: Walter has to persuade Beneatha that her *aspiration* is foolish.

6. Conflict: Mama fears that her plans for the insurance *money* could be selfish.
 - a. Obstacle: insurance *money*
 - b. Complication: Ruth has to persuade Mama to keep the insurance *money* for herself.
7. Conflict: Mama objects to Beneatha's *irreligious* remarks.
 - a. Obstacle: *religion*
 - b. Complication: Mama seeks to keep Beneatha's *irreligious* opinions in line.

Shortage of money, parental responsibility, disreputable friends, unemployment, dreams deferred, and changing moral standards—each of the family's conflicts is carefully spelled out. (Incidentally, the insurance check would be the MacGuffin in this play.) The opening scene furnishes much if not most of the facts needed for actors, directors, and designers to begin to understand the characters, situation, background story, and physical environment for what follows. It also introduces the primary conflict, which centers on Walter's scheme to buy a liquor store with his father's life insurance money. This scene is a model of realistic craftsmanship, and the treatment of its conflicts, coupled with their obstacles and complications, rewards patient analysis.

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Climaxes

A climax is a crucial turning point that profoundly changes the behavior of all who are present. As a rule, the highest peak of emotional intensity in the play is considered the main climax. The main climax can appear at an assortment of distances from the end of the play, but always somewhere near the end for reasons that should be obvious. In *A Raisin in the Sun* the main climax appears in the final scene with Walter, Mr. Lindner, and the family. The rest of the play occupies two and a half pages of dialogue after that. In *Oedipus Rex*, the main climax occurs near the end of episode 4, and the last two scenes are devoted to the catastrophe (scene of physical suffering) and the resolution. *The Wild Duck* has its main climax very near the end of the play, just after Hedvig shoots herself. In *American Buffalo*, the main climax occurs near the very end of the play, when Don realizes that Teach is a fraud and says to him, "You have lamed this up real good." Berniece playing the piano to exorcize Sutter's ghost is the main climax of *The Piano Lesson*. In these examples and many others, the main climaxes are the most thoroughly dramatic and memorable moments in the play.

A single climax may work all right for scholars, but for actors, directors, and designers the idea of one big, solitary climax in the

manner of Freytag is much too emotionally static. In the theatre, it is better to consider that every play contains three major climaxes that mark the beginning, middle, and end of the action, together with various minor climaxes supporting them. (Chapter 1 explains more about the beginning, middle, and end.) *The School for Scandal* contains five acts, but it has three major climaxes. The first major climax occurs in 1,1 when Lady Sneerwell sets in motion her plan to break up the attachment between Charles Surface and Maria. The second major climax is the famous “screen scene” in 5,2, which many consider a model of comedy writing. The third major climax (main climax) occurs in the final scene of the play when Joseph Surface is exposed as a fraud.

In addition to its three major climaxes, a play also contains an assortment of minor climaxes that occur every time a noticeable change takes place in the course of events. Minor climaxes show characters making or avoiding hard decisions about vital things in their lives, though not such life-changing decisions as found at the major climaxes. Let’s examine the following moment where a character changes in this manner. As we showed earlier, there are seven conflicts in the first scene of *A Raisin in the Sun*, but only one is significant enough to be considered a minor climax. It occurs when Beneatha reminds Walter that the insurance money belongs to Mama and that nothing he can say or do will ever tempt her to invest it in such a dubious enterprise as a liquor store. At this sharp reminder, Walter storms out of the apartment. It is a minor climax; first, because it relates to the primary conflict of the play directly and second, because if Walter had remained on stage, he would have been obliged to confront his mother directly about his plans for the life insurance money. The remainder of the play would have been very different indeed. As it is, Walter exits angrily, and the crucial issue of what will happen to the life insurance money remains unresolved. This minor climax shows Walter failing to deal with a vital problem in his life: his misguided ambition. Notice, too, that this minor climax contains a decisive physical action (exit and slamming the door) that accentuates its climactic nature.

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Recognition, Reversal, and Catastrophe

Before moving on to the remaining elements of dramatic structure, it will be helpful to pause and examine specific characteristics of climaxes in more detail. The word climax is a composite made up of two distinct processes that overlap in performance: recognition and reversal. **Recognition, according to Aristotle, is a change**

from ignorance to knowledge on the part of a character, typically the hero. At the main climax of *A Raisin in the Sun*, for example, Walter Younger recognizes that he has earned his family's shame and contempt, instead of their respect as he had desired. He has failed as a husband, father, provider, and human being. The most effective kind of recognition includes a **reversal, which is a radical change of circumstances**. After significant inner turmoil, Walter achieves self-respect and the respect of his family by cast renouncing his misguided wish-dream of instant financial success. Accordingly, in Walter Younger's case, the reversal of circumstances is from bad (humiliation) to good (respect). Given his new status in the family, the loss of the insurance money (primary obstacle) is no longer an important issue for him or them.

In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman's experience is similar in spirit to that of Walter Younger, but his reversal of circumstances is in the opposite direction. Willy discovers that he has been a failure as a father as well, but instead of renouncing his wish-dream, as Walter does, he takes it to the limit by sacrificing his life so that Biff can obtain his life insurance money and use it to become the big success Willy always wished for him. Willy's circumstances change from good (life) to bad (death), although he may believe otherwise himself. In classical tragedies, changes from good circumstances to bad coincide with a **catastrophe, which is an event of physical suffering**. The catastrophe is perhaps the single most distinguishing feature of classical tragedy. Willy's suicide is a catastrophe in this historical sense, as are Oedipus' self-mutilation and Hamlet's death. Furthermore, both plays are considered tragedies in the classical sense. Walter Younger undergoes a terrible humiliation and loses the insurance money, but technically speaking there is no catastrophe of a physical nature in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Psychological suffering, yes, but not physical suffering or death. How might the ending of this play be changed to be considered a tragedy in the classic sense? Whatever the case may be, the intense emotions that distinguish the main climax emerge from the feelings generated by a combination of recognition and reversal, either with or without a catastrophe. Incidentally, in both modern plays treated above, we are again reminded of getting or losing money as a general factor in the given circumstances.

Simple and Complex Plots

According to Aristotle, technically complex plots contain recognitions and reversals. He believed that complex plots were innately

dramatic and therefore the most effective plots in the theatre. Technically **simple plots, he said, do not contain recognitions and reversals**. Note the terms simple and complex have no connection here with the intricacy of a play's story, which is a separate issue. Most plays include recognitions and reversals, and for this reason, most plots are considered complex in the technical sense. Aristotle seemed to think that simple plots are not inherently dramatic. Nevertheless, many playwrights, even Greek classical playwrights, have made practical use of them. The plots of *Mother Courage*, *Happy Days*, *Three Sisters*, and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, for example, are technically simple because they do not contain recognitions or reversals in their leading characters, yet no one would accuse these plays of being undramatic. Plays with complex plots have no particular advantage over those with simple plots. In the hands of a skilled playwright, either type can be effective. The main difference lies in the presence or absence of recognition and reversal, most often in the leading character.

Resolution

Resolution refers to all the events following the main climax. This feature is sometimes called the denouement, outcome, falling action, or unraveling. The resolution is characterized by a gradual lessening of the tension and the emergence of a new relationship between the play's opposing forces. The resolution in *Oedipus Rex* begins after the Messenger recounts the double catastrophe of Jocasta's suicide and Oedipus' self-mutilation. It consists of Oedipus' public expression of guilt and his banishment by Creon. The resolution in *Hamlet* comprises the arrival of Fortinbras and the ceremonial removal of Hamlet's body from the stage. The resolution in *Tartuffe* is very brief, consisting of Tartuffe's arrest and the restoration of Orgon's possessions. The resolution in *The Lower Depths* consists of physical action (an offstage suicide) and one line of dialogue. The resolution in *A Lie of the Mind* includes the folding of the flag and a fleeting moment of affection between Baylor and Meg. The final scene in *Death of a Salesman*, called the "Requiem" in the play, is its resolution. It also acts as an epilogue (formal concluding scene) to the play. The resolution in *American Buffalo* consists of Don reproaching Teach and apologizing to Bob. Note that a resolution is only an apparent re-balancing of the conflicting forces in a play. It is interesting to speculate what might happen to the characters after their stage story is finished.

Progressions and Structure in Nonrealistic Plays

Progressions

Except for their notable use of digressions, nonrealistic plays are just like their realistic and historical counterparts in the use of progressions to advance the dramatic action from one point to the next. They employ acts, formal and French Scenes, units, beats, and acts in the same way and with the same purpose. The difference between realism and nonrealism does not lie in understanding the need to make use of progressions, but by axiomatically accepting their presence, identifying them, and pinning down their interrelations. Consequently, we can pass over beats, unit, scenes, and acts, and go directly to those features in nonrealistic plays that tend to differ from historical and realistic expectations.

Digressions

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Earlier we said that digressions are deviations from the plot and that they need to be understood and expressed in such a way as to ensure an effortless connection with the main idea. For nonrealistic plays, this statement is both true and not true. It is true that digressions need to correspond with the main idea, but it is not necessarily true that they need to be smoothed out to avoid calling attention to themselves. Digressions in nonrealistic plays are intended as open expressions or ironic counterpoints of the main idea. Indeed, digressions are characteristic of nonrealism in general and essential to its style. Accordingly, the investigative task in nonrealistic plays is to understand the thematic issues that lie behind the digressions, and then to discover whether the issues at stake are treated with approval, detachment, irony, ridicule, parody, or whatever is the outlook of the play.

In a nonrealistic play such as *Machinal*, this task is relatively easy because the main idea is in the title—machinal means action without thinking—and the dehumanizing impulse of modern urban life reveals itself openly everywhere in the play. Some examples of such thematic outbursts in *Machinal* include the Mother's fixation on emptying the garbage, and the voices of the Boy and Girl ironically calling for each other outside the Young Woman's apartment (Scene 2); the Nurse's speech to the Young Woman about the joys of motherhood, and the Young Woman's nightmare monologue following the birth of her child (Scene 4); the mechanical love relations among the characters

in the bar, and the contrasting sympathetic relationship of the Young Woman and First Man later in the same episode (Scene 5); the ironic tune *Cielito Lindo* (little heaven) played by the organ grinder and its emotional influence on the Young Woman; the mechanical nature of her dressing and undressing (Scene 6); and the pieties of the Priest and the indifferent comments of the Reporters as the Young Woman goes to the death chamber (Scene 9). These moments might be digressions, or at least detours, in a realistic or classic play, but in *Machinal* they serve as open windows into its main idea.

Digressions in nonrealistic serve as entertaining variations of various thematic issues; not as realistic episodes in themselves, but as deliberate exaggerations, nightmares, daydreams, and comic or ironic parodies of the main idea. Sometimes digressions are motivated by the characters in a traditionally plausible manner. More often they are driven exclusively by the theme, in which case the inner life of the play can take on a curious life of its own. In any case, digressions in nonrealistic plays are intended to call attention to themselves frankly as digressions—pauses for dwelling on the main idea—and not “smoothed out” for the sake of realistic plausibility. As a final thought, notice that *Happy Days* is a play with scarcely any conventional plot at all, but consists almost entirely of digressions.

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Structure

For scholars and practitioners alike, there is always a risk of giving too much attention to the exceptional features of nonrealism and too little to the structure that supports them. All these issues make the dramatic structure in nonrealistic plays problematic to deal with, which is why nonrealistic structure needs to be studied with special care. Nonrealistic plays need to be looked at little by little as well as in one piece, which means searching for their structural features, clarifying them, and understanding how they relate to each other.

Point of Attack

Since nonrealistic plays tend to have far less background story than realistic plays (see Chapter 3), they also tend to employ an early point of attack. In other words, nonrealistic plays favor present action over background story.

In this respect, *The Birthday Party* is an example. From the background story, we learn that Stanley has been in hiding ever since his

piano concert was unexpectedly canceled and that Goldberg and McCann have been searching for him. In the present action, they find him, torment him, and take him away. The present action illustrating Stanley's tortured world takes place on stage before us. *Angels in America* also has an early point of attack. It seems to have a significant amount of background story, and it does. With two exceptions, however, the background story does not exert significant influence on present action as such but reinforces the totality of the play's environment. The two exceptions are Roy Cohn's embezzlement of a client's funds and Prior Walter's diagnosis with terminal AIDS, both of which do indeed influence the present action in significant ways. However, the remainder of the background story reinforces the play's thematic milieu more than it propels the present action. Past actions such as Sarah Ironson's emigration to America; Prior Walter's ancestry; Ronald Reagan's presidency; Joe and Harper Pitt's religion, troubled childhoods, unstable marriage, and conflicted personalities; the disappearance of Prior Walter's cat; Roy Cohn's role in the trial and execution of the Rosenbergs; Joe Pitt's employment as a law clerk, and Louis Ironson's employment as a word processor; Prior Walter and Belize's former relationship—all these background story events serve to support the play's thematic center, more than they influence the onstage action. In this case, the thematic environment consists of anomie, the collapse of traditional social standards. Like other nonrealistic plays, the point of attack is early in the timeline of the background story to focus attention on the characters' ongoing adjustments to its present-day anomie.

Primary Event

It is not hard to discover the primary event in nonrealistic plays, because there is usually minimal background story to sort through. In *Fefu and Her Friends*, the primary event is the mysterious injury Julia suffered from a shooting accident. (The women's get-together is also an attempt to assist in her rehabilitation.) Each character responds in a different way to Julia's injury: curious, indifferent, flippant, apprehensive, and more. The primary event in *Top Girls* is Marlene's executive promotion. The summons from Claudius forms the primary event in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. In *Mother Courage* the Chief commands that the Sergeant must assemble a squadron of recruits because the war is killing too many soldiers. Jake's terrible abuse of his wife, Beth, is the primary event in *A Lie of the Mind*. (Or could it be the death of Jake's father?) What is the primary event in *Happy Days*?

Conflict

The problem of identifying conflict in nonrealistic drama only arises if one is not committed to the axiomatic necessity of conflict, or if the idea of conflict is understood too narrowly. A representative example is 3,1 in *Angels in America*, where the two historical Prior Walters (thirteenth-century Prior Walter 1 and seventeenth-century Prior Walter 2) appear before the present-day Prior Walter in a terrifying vision. The word nightmare in the stage directions should be a clue to the existence of conflict, and a close study of the episode confirms it. The conflict in this episode is Prior Walter's protest against the frightening presence of the two supernatural Prior Walters. The obstacle is the task the visitors have been sent by Providence to carry out. The complication is the supernatural visitors' urgent need to persuade Prior Walter of its vital importance (they thought it would be an easy task). All the necessary elements must be pro-actively performed to illuminate this conflict. In other words, to illustrate the conflict here the phantoms must do more than "deliver a message," and Prior Walter must do more than just "receive a message against his will." The first step in finding conflict is a commitment to its absolute necessity everywhere and at all times in a play.

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Climaxes

Climaxes in nonrealistic plays tend to be more understated and ambiguous than those in standard plays. Each plot in *Angels in America*—Joe Pitt and Roy Cohn, Harper Pitt and her husband Joe, Louis Ironson and Prior Walter, and Prior Walter and the Angel—contains three major climaxes that form the beginning, middle, and end of each storyline in a standard manner. The first major climax is always the inciting action. For the main plot with Joe Pitt and Roy Cohn, as we saw earlier, the first major climax (inciting action) would be 1,2, when Cohn offers Pitt a position in Washington; and for the plot involving Louis Ironson and Prior Walter, the first major climax would be 1,4, when Louis learns about Prior's terminal illness. The second major climax for both plots occurs in 2,9, which the playwright tellingly labels a "split scene": Joe Pitt abandons his wife, Harper, and Louis Ironson abandons his ailing partner, Prior Walter. This double episode marks the second major climax or "tipping point" of the play, the event where the drive toward the remainder of the play becomes unavoidable. The third major climax for Joe Pitt and Roy Cohn's plot occurs in 3,5 when Joe declines Cohn's offer to work for him in Washington, D.C. The third major climax for

Luis Ironson is 3,7 when he makes amends for abandoning Prior, his former lover, by helping Joe Pitt come to terms with his new-found sexuality. It is no accident that major and minor climaxes operate the same way in *Angels in America* as they would in realistic and historical plays. The content of this play is original, but it makes use of climaxes in a standard manner. With only a little extra effort, commitment to the essential elements of drama should resolve any lack of clarity regarding climaxes in nonrealistic plays.

Endings

Recognition, reversal, catastrophe, resolution, and simple or complex plotting mutually form a play's conclusion. It is the ending that shows how the characters come to terms with the special world of the play and where the most characteristic expressions of nonrealism appear.

The climax of *Machinal* occurs in a dramatic courtroom scene when the Young Woman admits that she killed her husband. The recognition happens after that, when "the enormity of her isolation comes upon her." Her imprisonment is the reversal of circumstances, and the execution itself, which occurs after the curtain, is the catastrophe. The resolution consists of the final episode, which exposes the indifference of the Matron, Jailer, Barber, Priest, and in particular the Reporters. The plot is technically complex because the Young Woman recognizes the truth of her situation and suffers death as a result of it. Despite the assertive nonrealism of *Machinal*, the ending contains all the required features of a classical tragedy.

It appears that the climax of *Fefu and Her Friends* occurs when Fefu shoots and kills a rabbit in the backyard, simultaneously resulting in Julia's death inside the house. It is a dramatic event indeed, but the prior conversation between Fefu and Julia is a more accurate choice for the climax. In their brief exchange, Fefu seeks a solution to her unhappiness from Julia, and Julia sympathizes but fears that her advice could be harmful to Fefu. After all, Julia was severely damaged by her contact with the play's special world. Julia blesses Fefu, after which Fefu asks for and receives her forgiveness and then goes into the backyard to shoot the rabbit. Fefu and Julia understand each other even though the exact subject of their conversation is not made clear in the dialogue. What is clear is that during this event the rules of the game have changed from realism to nonrealism without warning, and it will be necessary to step back from the particulars for a moment to recognize what is happening in more general terms. Taking place before us is a purification ritual whose purpose is to

remove any traces of uncleanness before undertaking a life-changing task. (See myth and ritual in the Introduction.) The “uncleanness” consists of the second-hand ideas that cloud the characters’ thinking and make them unhappy despite their privileged circumstances and elite educations. The playwright has chosen to express the climax in nonrealistic ritual form to emphasize that the ultimate goal of consciousness-raising is a personal experience, not group meetings; action, not talk. Fefu recognizes this, takes action to reverse her unhappy life by shooting the “rabbit,” and experiences a catastrophe channeled through Julia’s death. The resolution consists of Fefu’s final line: “I killed it . . . I just shot it . . . and killed it . . . Julia . . .” and a dramatic tableau of Fefu holding a dead rabbit with all the women surrounding Julia’s body. Recognition, reversal catastrophe, resolution, and a technically complex plot occur in mythic form beneath the seeable reality. The ending of *A Lie of the Mind* is structured as a symbolic ritual as well. It is the confession of a “sin” (Jake’s violent behavior) accompanied by a “penance” (he relinquishes his wife, Beth, to his kindhearted brother, Frankie).

What is the practical outcome of all these regular patterns, this fundamental elusiveness, and ambiguity of these endings? It is just this. The originality of nonrealistic plays derives precisely from their formal patterns, outward elusiveness, and apparent uncertainty; that is, their candid refusal to employ realistic plausibility. Although nonrealistic plays treat most structural features in a standard manner, they have a distinct tendency to handle endings in unusual ways to emphasize their formality, originality, and ambiguity. Characters in nonrealistic plays may come to recognize the nature of their special worlds or they may not, and their ability or inability to do so is calculatingly novel and ambiguous, never artistically unintelligible.

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Summary

A **progression** is a piece of dramatic action with a beginning, middle, and end. A **beat** is the smallest progression, the smallest piece of dramatic action. A **unit** is a group of connected beats. A **scene** is a group of units marked by a change of time or place. A **French Scene** is a new arrangement of characters on stage indicated by an entrance or exit. Formal scenes are shown as such, with labels, such as Scene 1, Scene 2, and so forth. **Acts** are the primary and most substantial progressions of a play. **Digressions** are events that deviate, or seem to, from the forward movement of the plot. **Structure** is the arrangement of

the parts of the play and their relationship to each other and the whole play. A **linear plot** begins at a certain point, moves through a series of events, and then ends up at another point. A **non-linear plot** (sometimes called a disjointed, disarranged, or disrupted plot) does not follow a chronological path but may contain other plot-lines, flashbacks, dreams, soliloquies, and narrated stories within the primary plot. A **causal or cause-and-effect plot** is such that one or more scenes are the result of another or other scenes. In an **epic plot**, each scene is relatively autonomous and not necessarily the result of another or other scenes. The **point of attack** is the moment in time when the play begins in relation to the chronology of the background story. The **primary event** is a crucial event in the background story that produces the conditions necessary for the play to take place. The **inciting action** is the onstage event that starts the primary conflict of the play. **Conflict** refers to the counter-movements in the plot created by opposing motives and events. A **climax** is a crucial turning point in the course of the stage action that profoundly changes the behavior of all who are present. An **obstacle** is something that obstructs or hinders the progress of a character's goal. **Complications** are the unexpected changes in existing plans, methods, or attitudes that make a situation more difficult to deal with. **Recognition**, according to Aristotle, is a change from ignorance to knowledge on the part of a character, typically the hero. A **reversal** is a radical change of circumstances. A **catastrophe** is an event of physical suffering. **Technically complex plots** contain recognitions and reversals. **Technically simple plots** do not include recognition and reversal. **Resolution** refers to all the events following the main climax.

Exercises for a Scene or Short Play

1. **Progressions.** Subdivide a scene or a short play into beats and units and give each beat and unit a working title for use during analysis. Talk about how each beat helps the development of its enclosing unit and how each unit helps the development of its enclosing scene. Explore how each scene helps the development of its enclosing act and how each act helps the development of the play as a whole. Explore the practical application of this practice for actors, directors, and designers.
2. **Structure.** Identify and explain the rationale for the inciting action. Identify and describe the justification for the most significant conflicts, along with their associated obstacles and complications. Identify and describe the reasoning that supports

the three major climaxes. Determine whether the plot of your scene or play is technically simple or technically complex, according to Aristotle's way of thinking. Explain the rationale for each type of plot. Identify the events that comprise the resolution of your scene or play. Explain how the major conflicts of your scene or play readjust themselves in the resolution. Make a graphic illustration of the overall pattern ("cardiogram") formed by the inciting action, major and minor climaxes, and resolution. Explain the performance and physical production value of this practice for actors, directors, and designers.

3. **Following Action Analysis.** Explain how the seed is latent in each act, the primary event, primary conflict, three major climaxes, and ending.

Character

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In everyday conversation, the term *character* has taken on several meanings over time. Initially, it came from a Middle English source and indicated something fixed and permanent, like an identifying mark or a sign on a building. In Shakespeare's time, character was still considered a permanent feature. It was said to result from bodily fluids called *humours* that were thought to control the tendencies of one's temperament (more about this below). In the nineteenth century, character continued to mean a fixed state, though with added ethical implications, as in, "She has character." This meaning was associated with moral strength, self-discipline, and, most important to the Victorians, respectability. The modern definition of character is more wide-ranging than that. In theatrical usage, we consider character to be the pattern of action that identifies a person, or what Aristotle called *habitual action* (action acquired by habit). Some writers think this means that characters change their individuality during a play, while others claim they only reveal hidden traits. It is an interesting question, but it need not detain us here. In every practical sense, **character is a habitual pattern of action identified with a particular figure.**

Although characters are sometimes studied as if they were real people, in fact they function more like androids whose programming depends upon the playwright, director, and actor. It is useless to rely too much on psychoanalytical methods to analyze them. Psychoanalysis is a way of examining mental disorders in humans, and its purpose is the treatment of those disorders. Occasionally such methods can be useful in dramatic circumstances, but character analysis is a creative (artificial) enterprise, not a medical one. Dramatic characters may be embodied by real people, perform actions similar

to those of real people, and display emotional lives similar to those of real people, but compared to real people, stage characters are exceedingly predictable. In life, very few people are as absorbed with a single overpowering goal as the characters are in plays. The compact expressiveness of drama requires reduction to essentials. Therefore, to portray character, the whole array of ordinary human behavior must be condensed into a few selected, pre-programmed features.

This chapter will study character under nine headings: (1) objectives equip the characters with goals to pursue; (2) actions are the practical behaviors they undertake toward others to pursue those goals; (3) adaptations are the behaviors applied to those actions; (4) conflict describes the tensions between the characters in the pursuit of their goals; (5) willpower is the force with which characters pursue their goals; (6) values form the ethical foundation upon which characters base their actions; and (7) personality traits are those strokes of individuality that indicate how characters look, feel, and think. The topic of (8) complexity explains the degree of self-awareness in a character, and (9) relationships are the primary and secondary connections among the characters. These topics provide the general lines of inquiry that can be used to understand a dramatic character. Some actors consider these topics as “layers” that accumulate to form a stage character. Analyzing layer by layer is a useful way to come to terms with a character without having to deal with everything at once.

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Objectives and Super-Objectives

The previous chapter explored the storytelling features of progressions, and how the playwright arranges them for maximum dramatic outcome. Progressions have character-related elements too, called objectives. Like progressions, objectives are indispensable features of a play. Accordingly, different readers analyzing the same play should arrive at plausibly comparable character objectives. Objectives are also like progressions in that they are divided into larger and smaller gradations that correspond to the beats, units, scenes, and acts in the plot. Indeed, progressions and objectives are inseparably connected.

We use the term *objectives* in this book because it was the term chosen by the original translator of Stanislavsky's works and therefore the name with which English-speaking actors, directors, and designers are most familiar. In the new translations of Stanislavsky, Jean Benedetti uses the term *task*. Another alternative is *problem*. Harold Clurman with the members of the Group Theatre and their

students and followers use the words *spine* or *intention*. The terms may vary, but they mean the same thing: **an objective is what a character wants to accomplish from event to event; and a super-objective is what a character wants to accomplish for the whole play.** Director and critic Harold Clurman cautioned against always looking for notable personality traits in a character. Even though many of the characters will experience similar feelings of anger, joy, or sadness, Clurman said, it is their super-objective that explains these changing feelings and thoughts by showing how they are all related to a single permanent goal.

Super-objectives are best understood in relation to a specific play, so we will study *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov for this purpose and consider Irina as the principal figure among the sisters. For Irina's super-objective, search for what she wants to do with her life. The play begins on her name day. (In Russia, a person's birthday is celebrated on the day honoring the saint after whom the person is named.) Equally important, it has been one year since their father died, marking the end of the traditional Russian period of mourning, an end to black clothing and reverently restrained behavior. Today Irina, who is the youngest sibling, feels a fresh sense of freedom and hope. In the opening scene, she says excitedly, "If only we could go back to Moscow! Sell the house, finish with our life here, and go back to Moscow." When their elderly friend, Dr. Chebutykin (che-boo-TEE-kin), encourages her youthful high spirits, she responds,

When I woke up this morning [. . .] I suddenly felt as if everything in the world had become clear to me, and I knew the way I ought to live. [. . .] Man must work by the seat of his brow whatever his class, and that should make up the whole meaning and purpose of his life and happiness and contentment.

From these statements and other information in the play, we might conclude that Irina's super-objective is "to find happiness," perhaps through a fulfilling vocation. This would be essentially correct, but most readers would agree that it is too generic and leaves out a large part of Irina's character, in particular her yearning for love. A more accurate super-objective for her would be "to win the love of the one who was meant for me." Several other alternatives are possible as well, but this is a suitably accurate choice because it has a noticeable effect on everything Irina does in the play.

The Prozorov family lives in a provincial town at some distance from Moscow. And in the restricted environment of provincial life, Irina's super-objective is one that requires patience, courage, and, above all, hope. Seeking to achieve it, she must first accomplish a number of short-term objectives, each one tied to the individual progressions of her role. Behaviorally, she zigzags, first in one direction, then in another according to these progressions, but always with one overall goal in her thoughts. For example, in the first unit of the play, she disapproves of Olga's talk about their father's funeral. Her objective for this unit is "to remind Olga their mourning period has ended." In the next unit, Irina's objective is "to encourage Olga's wish to return to Moscow," where they used to live so happily, and more handsome young men were available. As soon as Irina remembers that her sister, Masha, would not be able to join them in Moscow because she is married to the local schoolmaster, her objective changes, "to play down Masha's unhappiness." In the event with Chebutykin that follows, Irina reveals her impatience to achieve her super-objective. She says to him, "I long for work. And if I don't get up early from now on and really work, you can refuse to be friends with me." Her objective here is "to encourage his support of her feelings." Each of Irina's secondary objectives complements its particular progression.

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It makes sense that a successful super-objective should relate to the main idea of the play, and Chapter 7 will explain the concept of the main idea in depth. However, let's agree for now that the main idea of *Three Sisters* is *yearning for a dream*. (This was the main idea for Nemirovich-Danchenko's 1940 revival of the play. He also noted that yearning for a dream is different from aspiring for a dream or working for a dream.) It is easy to see how Irina's short-term objectives relate to this main idea. Nevertheless, for the main idea to be persuasive for the entire play, the super-objectives of all the other characters must somehow connect to it as well. And they do connect to it because every character in the play is yearning for a dream of their own. Although each of their super-objectives contains its own feelings and thoughts as well as supporting objectives and outcomes, each one also relates to the main idea of the play: yearning for a dream.

Action

Action is the forcing behavior that characters direct toward each other to accomplish their objectives. Sometimes the term *action* is augmented by the adjective dramatic—dramatic action—to emphasize the

fact that on stage, genuine action is always goal oriented. The concept of action originates from Aristotle, but it was Stanislavsky (by way of Nemirovich-Danchenko and the Russian Formalist critics) who applied the concept of action systematically to performance and production.

Since action is a process of forcing, it is always directed toward another character. As Francis Hodge explains it, Character A forces Character B; B receives the forcing and adjusts to it; and then B forces A; A receives the forcing and adjusts to it; and then A forces B, etc., until the event is interrupted, delayed, or resolved either by A or B getting the better of the other or else by a deadlock. Every progression in a play is purposed to force someone to do something to someone else to accomplish a goal, and this forcing process is called the (dramatic) action.

To express action in words, active (transitive) verbs are best because they convey aggressive forcing rather than passive (intransitive) receiving. For example, "A encourages B" is active, but "B is encouraged by A" is passive. Certain verbs may feel like they ought to be active, but in reality, they cannot be effectively acted. Director Max Stafford-Clark calls them false active verbs or false actions. Verbs from this group merely describe the form of communication taking place in the dialogue (question, explain, announce, etc.). Others merely describe physical activity (laugh, jump, run, deliver, etc.). Sometimes false active verbs are useful as actions, but active verbs always have the advantage because they are aimed at another character and possess the kind of sturdy, psychological foundation recommended by Stanislavsky and Clurman.

Although objectives and actions are inherent in every progression, we limit the explanation here to a single brief scene. We are helped in this by Hodge's teaching and furthermore by a process called "actioning" developed by Max Stafford-Clark, both of whom draw their thinking from Stanislavsky. The passage is from the opening scene of the second act of *Three Sisters*. It dramatizes how the love between Andrey (brother of the three sisters) and Natasha (an outsider from the town) has deteriorated over the two years they have been married. Natasha has grown petty and selfish, while Andrey has become withdrawn and unresponsive. She pampers their infant child, Bobik, and behaves arrogantly toward Andrey's sisters and the household servants. The time is evening, and Natasha is prowling about the house, looking for any candles that might be left burning. Andrey is hiding away, reading in his study.

Since action is a means of achieving an objective, it is crucial that objectives be defined beforehand, so actions are purpose-driven

rather than being arbitrary "choices." For this scene, let Natasha's objective be "to keep close watch over the household," and let Andrey's be "to escape his wife." Here the actioning is underlined and bracketed after each character's name.

(It is eight o'clock in the evening. The faint sound of an accordion is heard coming from the street. The stage is unlit. Enter NATASHA in a dressing-gown, carrying a candle. She crosses the stage and stops by the door leading to ANDREY'S room.)

NATASHA [Distracts]. What are you doing, Andrey? Reading? It's all right, I only wanted to know ... (*Goes to another door, opens it, looks inside and shuts it again.*) Must make sure no one's left a candle burning anywhere ...

ANDREY [Ignores]. (*comes in with a book in his hand*) What is it, Natasha?

NATASHA [Criticizes]. I was just going around to see if anyone had left a light burning. It's Shrovetide – carnival week, and the servants are so excited about it ... anything might happen! You've got to watch them. Last night about twelve o'clock I happened to go into the dining-room, and – would you believe it? – there was a candle alight on the table. I've not found out who lit it. (*Puts the candle down.*) What time is it?

ANDREY [Neutralizes]. (*glances at the clock*) Quarter past eight.

NATASHA [Warns]. And Olga and Irina still out. They aren't back from work yet, poor things! Olga's still at some teachers' conference, and Irina's at the post office. (*Sighs.*) This morning I said to Irina: "Do take care of yourself, my dear." But she won't listen. Did you say it was a quarter past eight? I'm afraid Bobik is not at all well. Why does he get so cold? Yesterday he had a temperature, but today he feels quite cold when you touch him ... I'm so afraid!

ANDREY [Averts]. It's all right, Natasha. The boy's well enough.

NATASHA [Pesters]. Still, I think he ought to have a special diet. I'm so anxious about him. By the way, they tell me that some carnival party's supposed to be coming here soon after nine. I'd rather they didn't come, Andrey.

ANDREY [Discourages]. Well, I really don't know what I can do. They've been asked to come.

NATASHA [Outwits]. This morning the dear little fellow woke up and looked at me, and then suddenly he smiled. He recognized me, you see. "Good morning, Bobik," I said, "good morning, darling precious!" And then he laughed. Babies understand everything, you know, they understand us perfectly well. Anyway, Andrey, I'll tell the servants not to let that carnival party in.

ANDREY [Stifles]. (*hesitatingly*) Well ... it's really for my sisters to decide, isn't it? It's their house, after all.

NATASHA [Sabotages]. Yes, it's their house as well. I'll tell them, too ... They're so kind ... (*Going.*) I've ordered buttermilk for supper. The doctor says you ought to eat nothing but buttermilk, or you'll never get any thinner. (*Stops.*) [Manipulates] Bobik feels so cold. I'm afraid his room is too cold for him. He ought to move into a warmer room, at least until the warm weather comes. Irina's room, for instance — that's just a perfect room for a baby: it's dry, and it gets the sun all day long. We must tell her: perhaps she'd share Olga's room for a bit ... In any case, she's never at home during the day, she only sleeps there ... (*Pause.*) [Appease] Darling, why don't you say anything?

ANDREY [Eludes]. I was just day-dreaming ... There's nothing to say, anyway ...

NATASHA [Pesters]. Well ... What was it I was going to tell you? Oh, yes! Ferapont from

the Council Office wants to see you about something.

ANDREY [*Tolerates*]. (*yawns*) Tell him to come up.

(*NATASHA goes out. ANDREY, bending over the candle which she has left behind, continues to read his book.*)

Using the predefined objectives, most of these actions are evident from the dialogue itself. Depending on the given objectives and the insight of the performer, however, the actions may sometimes be different from what is believed to be evident in the dialogue. What actions could Natasha make use of, for instance, if her objective were “to recover her husband’s love”? What actions would Andrey make use of if his objective were “to relieve his emotional pain”?

Apparently, verb choice is crucial in determining actions, but the analytical process is one of insight more than vocabulary. Action is made up of basic human behavior that can be readily understood. The question to ask is: what is happening outside and inside the line of dialogue? Sometimes the answer can be hard to pin down, but then again, the process of finding the action is always a challenge, just as is the process of script analysis itself.

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Adaptations—An Aside

Actions in themselves cannot express the full range of mental and physical ingenuities involved in accomplishing an objective. **Adaptations are the psychological and physical ingenuities characters use in adjusting themselves to one another in a variety of relationships and as an aid in carrying out an objective** (Stanislavsky, 2008: 259). Conscious awareness of adaptations is particularly useful, Stanislavsky said, when a character spends a long time with a single objective and a fixed range of actions. In these instances, it would be easy for the performance to become monotonous. Seeking different adaptations helps to avoid this too-frequent problem. Some examples of mental states, moods, and emotions that could stimulate new adaptations include anxious, bitter, dreary, gracious, impudent, lazy, playful, rough, soothing, stupid, warm, wistful, worried, etc. Any of these modifiers and many more besides could be used as the basis for fresh and unexpected adaptations. On the other hand, Stanislavsky warned, there is also a danger of enacting pre-planned adaptations for their own sake. For example, instead of “I want to perform my action in a worried manner,” an

actor could unthinkingly slip into “I want to be worried,” or worse, “I want to look like I am worried.” In theatre parlance, this would be called indicating (playing an emotion), a serious fault resulting in generalized acting and clichés. Adaptations are best perceived by instinct rather than pre-planning, said Stanislavsky, or perhaps only used in rehearsal or class exercises to expand an actor’s range of mental and physical ingenuities.

Michael Chekhov and his followers agree with Stanislavsky about the need for mental and physical ingenuities and that indicating is faulty acting. However, they would avoid the risks involved with pre-planned adaptations by performing actions according to specific qualities. Some writers call these adverbs or tactics. He explained that actions are “what” the characters do, and qualities are “how” they do them, whether anxiously, bitterly, drearily, graciously, etc. It’s a subtle but important question, and readers wishing to know more about adaptations and qualities should consult the works of Stanislavsky and Michael Chekhov, as well as instructive writings by their followers. In any case, it is essential to recognize that adaptations and qualities are not inbuilt, like progressions and objectives, but instead they are used by the actors to color their actions. This subjective attribute makes adaptations a subject more for performance, classroom, or rehearsal than for script analysis as such. We discuss the issue here to make the distinction clear and add to the effort of standardizing theatre vocabulary.

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Conflict

The term *conflict* stems from a Latin root meaning to strike together, from which comes its general meaning of a battle, quarrel, or struggle for power between opposing forces. In the last chapter, we discussed conflict with regard to a play’s structure. Here we address conflict in connection with character.

The essence of drama lies in continuous conflict in each minute and each second of stage action. Conflict is an axiom of drama. There is no life on stage outside of conflict. Instead of being a single narrow concept, however, conflict may appear in different forms. There is conflict between one character and another, between character and environment, between character and destiny or the forces of nature, between character and ideas, or even among the feelings within a single character. All these are valid conflicts, but not all of them produce the same kinds of tensions.

Internal Conflicts

Internal conflicts are those arising when abstract ideas—social conventions, destiny, history, government, etc.—interfere with a character's plans or ideals. Internal conflicts and intellectual tensions are particularly useful for designers in conceiving the physical production, as will be seen in the next chapter and Appendix C. Internal conflicts are most conspicuous in nonrealistic plays, which inherently rely on intellectual tensions for meaning as well as for physical production.

External Conflicts: Conflicts of Objectives

External conflicts depend upon the “general law of the theatre” deduced by nineteenth-century French writer and critic Ferdinand Brunetière (1849–1906). “The general law of the theater is defined,” he said, “by the action of a will conscious of itself; and the dramatic [forms] are distinguished by the nature of the obstacles encountered by this will” (Brunetière, 1914 [1894]: 79–80). In other words, **external conflicts** are those arising when one character's objectives stand in the way of other characters attempting to fulfill their objectives. A play is an interlocking chain of such “external” conflicts, external because they are embodied in the actions of specific characters as opposed to abstract ideas.

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To demonstrate external conflicts, we will examine *A Raisin in the Sun* once more. Walter desires control of his father's life insurance money “to become a big success,” and the question is whether he will succeed in realizing his ambition to be a rich business man. He is prevented from fulfilling this super-objective by Mama's super-objective, which is to use the money “to help her family escape from poverty and oppression.” This is their external conflict. Walter eventually overcomes his mother's opposition, but he is defeated by his friend Willy, whose goal is to get hold of the insurance money for his own purpose. Practical conflict arises from opposing desires for the use of the insurance money. It is not hard to find conflicts of objectives; the difficulty is not necessarily in recognizing them but in satisfactorily expressing the force of their inbuilt opposition.

External Conflicts: Role Conflicts

Role conflicts arise from characters' opposing images of themselves and each other. We play many roles in life—parent, teacher,

son or daughter, friend, employee, master, servant, etc.—so it is not difficult to see how the term *role* is closely related to character. Just as with conflicts of objectives, there may be a number of different role conflicts among the characters throughout the play, each one defined by the particular conditions in the given circumstances.

For an explanation of role conflicts, let's return to the same scene between Walter and Ruth in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Walter's self-image is that of a good husband and father, and he considers Ruth to be an unsympathetic wife. In contrast, Ruth's self-image is that of a neglected wife, and she considers Walter to be an irresponsible husband and father. Their images of themselves and each other are in disagreement and this disagreement governs how they relate to each other. Walter believes he is a responsible husband, yet Ruth treats him as an irresponsible husband. Ruth believes she is a neglected wife, yet Walter treats her as an unsympathetic wife.

Of the two types of conflicts just studied, conflicts of objectives are used more often because they are somewhat easier to grasp and explain. Role conflicts are more challenging, but the outcome is potentially a greater assortment of performance options and more expressive characterization (psycho-physical embodiment of the character by the actor). Role conflicts, for example, were effectively employed in the work of stage director Elia Kazan (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Death of a Salesman*, *On the Waterfront*, *East of Eden*, et al.). Searching for both types of conflict can supply many useful possibilities for character relationships. After these conflicts have been identified in the script, the final choice depends, of course, on the creative imagination of the artistic team and which features of the play they seek to emphasize in performance.

Willpower

"[W]hat we ask of the theater," said Brunetière, "is the spectacle of a will striving towards a goal [objective], and conscious of the means which it employs" (1914 [1894]: 73). What may be called willpower means to set up an objective and direct everything toward it; to strive to bring everything into line with it. Hence, **willpower is the specific combination of determination and self-discipline that a character uses to accomplish an objective**. Some characters have difficult, life-changing objectives and push their willpower to the limit to achieve them. By definition, protagonists and antagonists are of this sort since their goal-oriented determination shapes the main conflict of a play.

Those characters who are easily influenced to change their minds, or who lack the ability to resist the influence of others, may be said to have a lesser amount of willpower. Examples from this group are Polonius, Claudius's befuddled chief counselor (*Hamlet*); Hjalmar Ekdal, the artist wannabe who was persuaded with money, a career, and a wife to keep quiet about his father's wrongful imprisonment (*The Wild Duck*); and Bob, the "gopher," surrogate son, and apprentice thief (*American Buffalo*).

Some characters have modest objectives they can accomplish with minimal effort of will. Among them are the Priest of Zeus, who comes before Oedipus to warn him of the citizens' problems (*Oedipus Rex*); the Gravedigger, who provides Hamlet with a safe opportunity to evaluate his troubles (*Hamlet*); Charley, Willie Loman's sympathetic neighbor (*Death of a Salesman*); and Wining Boy, the wandering poet, singer, and storyteller (*The Piano Lesson*).

In short, all characters have willpower of a sort. It's only that some objectives are more audacious than others, just as some of the actions associated with them are more audacious than others.

Values

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Values are the beliefs that shape a character's opinions of good and bad, right and wrong. Values might be virtues, vices, or a mixture of honest convictions and tactics only adopted for short-term gains. Madame Pernelle, Orgon's mother in *Tartuffe*, is a character whose conservative ethical values are tactics unconsciously adopted to retain power over her son. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman believes that his America is fair-minded, and that good friends and hard work will result in success and happiness—"the greatest country in the world." He cannot see that his single-minded faith in the American Dream is at odds with a reality dominated by hardheaded commercial interests indifferent to that very dream.

Doaker Charles, a retired railroad cook in *The Piano Lesson*, expresses his values through the image of the railroad he knows so well.

DOAKER. If everybody stay in one place I believe this would be a better world. Now what I done learned after twenty-seven years of railroading is this ... if the train stays on the track ... it's going to get where it's

going. It might not be where you're going. If it ain't, then all you got to do is sit and wait cause the train's coming back to get you. The train don't never stop. It'll come back every time.

Which is to say, stick to what you know how to do, mind your own business, and go along with the way things are. Doaker's values contrast with those of his nephew, Boy Willie, who is from a younger generation and sees the world differently. He is a free spirit.

BOY WILLIE. See now ... I'll tell you something about me. I done strung along and strung along. Going this way and that. Whatever way would lead me to a moment of peace. That's all I want. To be easy with everything. But I wasn't born to that. I was born to a time of fire.

The world ain't wanted no part of me. I could see that since I was about seven. The world say it's better off without me. See, Berniece accept that. She trying to come up where she can prove something to the world. Hell, the world a better place cause of me. I don't see it like Berniece. I got a heart that beats here and it beats just as loud as the next fellow's. Don't care if he black or white. Sometimes it beats louder. When it beats louder, then everybody can hear it. Some people get scared of that. Like Berniece. Some people get scared to hear a nigger's heart beating. They think you ought to lay low with that heart. Make it beat quiet and go along with everything the way it is. But my mama ain't birthed me for nothing. So what I got to do? I got to mark my passing on the road. Just like you write on a tree, "Boy Willie was here."

Amidst the clash of opposing values in the play, Wining Boy's magic persuades everyone to embrace the ancestral values embodied in the controversial piano.

Personality Traits

Personality traits are the internal and external features that set a character apart from others. Although the variety of personality traits is theoretically endless, the process of identifying in the written play is not that difficult. In each scene, a character is confronted with other characters, so that different personality traits emerge each time for each character. It is essential to understand that personality traits are only concepts. When actualized in performance, however, personality traits become adaptations (see above).

Willy Loman is a model character with which to explain this process. He reveals several of his most important personality traits in the opening scene. There Willy is impatient, indecisive, impulsive, and hurtful; "I said nothing happened. Didn't you hear me?" When he explains why he returned home unexpectedly, he is exhausted: "I'm tired to death . . . I couldn't make it. I just couldn't make it." His explanation is also absent-minded, "I suddenly couldn't drive anymore . . . Suddenly I realize I'm goin' sixty miles an hour and I don't remember the last five minutes. I'm—I can't seem to—keep my mind to it." The confusion that underscores his line, "I have such thoughts, I have such strange thoughts," shows emotional anxiety. His rejection of Linda's appeal to him to ask for a desk job reveals elevated self-confidence; "They don't need me in New York. I'm the New England man. I'm vital in New England." Another important trait is cynicism, which appears when Linda reminds him that Biff and Happy have not been home for some time, "Figure it out. Work a lifetime to pay off a house. You finally own it, and there's nobody to live in it." There is also evidence of loyalty and faithfulness, traits reflected in his civic values. More traits appear as the action unfolds, and these traits provide the raw material for Willy's personality profile.

What personality traits distinguish the four Prozorov siblings in *Three Sisters*? Olga is variously generous, gracious, considerate, and intelligent. As the oldest sibling, she has assumed parental responsibility for keeping up everyone's collective spirits. This has come at the expense of her personal happiness, as illustrated by her frequent migraines. Irina is the youngest of the four, variously excitable, sentimental, intelligent, spoiled, self-centered, and anxious about her future. The disintegration of her romantic view of love forms the primary action of the play. Masha is variously thoughtful, intelligent, bitter about her marriage, and desperate for companionship and affection. What traits emerge in her scenes with Colonel Vershinin? Brother Andrey is variously cultured, scholarly, kind, shy, poetical,

naïve, and insecure. What traits appear in his scenes with Natasha? Notice the siblings' shared personality traits of intelligence, ethical values, and culture, and yet their inability even to understand themselves or stand up for their own interests.

Complexity

Complexity refers to a character's capacity for self-knowledge within the fictional reality of the play. The most complex characters, those with the most capacity to know themselves, are typically protagonists and antagonists. Others are arranged around these characters in different levels of complexity depending on their capability for self-knowledge. This arrangement is not a defect in writing but rather a principle resulting from the technical requirements of play-writing and literary writing in general.

Character types show a single personality trait, mental state, feeling, or action, throughout the play. Character types, sometimes called one-dimensional characters, are immediately recognized as belonging to specific known categories of figures from everyday life, such as power-hungry dictators, domineering spouses, slow-witted or quick-witted servants, absent-minded professors, evil stepmothers, and so forth. A few models from the study plays are Bob, the wannabe crook in *American Buffalo*; Howard Wagner, the cold-hearted businessman in *Death of a Salesman*; and Osric, the foppish courtier in *Hamlet*. Notice there are no one-dimensional characters in *The Lower Depths*. One-dimensional characters show a minimum capacity for self-awareness and reveal very little about themselves apart from the narrow limitations of their type. They may be exciting and entertaining in themselves, but their dramaturgic significance arises from their involvement with more complex characters.

Intermediate characters possess a limited consciousness of the circumstances in which they find themselves; limited in the sense of being restricted to a particular facet of their circumstances. Intermediate characters, sometimes called two-dimensional, are exemplified by Linda Loman (my husband is troubled) and Happy Loman (my father doesn't love me) in *Death of a Salesman*, Mama Younger (my family's future) and Ruth Younger (my husband is easily led) in *A Raisin in the Sun*, Gertrude (my son is troubled) and Ophelia (Hamlet doesn't love me anymore) in *Hamlet*, Natasha Ivanovna (Andrey's sisters are difficult to deal with) in *Three Sisters*, and Doaker Charles (Berniece is troubled) in *The Piano Lesson*. Most often their

limited self-awareness is controlled by the given circumstances: Ruth Younger's awareness of her husband's selfishness, Ophelia's love for Hamlet, and Doaker Charles's respect for cultural history.

Complex characters are intensely conscious of the circumstances in which they find themselves. They know what they want, have the means to obtain it, and can adapt those means to its fulfillment. As a rule, the protagonist and the antagonist possess this level of complexity. Plays are purposely organized around them, and most of the action is intentionally devoted to them. There are exceptions to this principle, but not as many as one might think. Amongst the many characters and events in *The Lower Depths*, Natasha can be distinguished as the protagonist. It is no accident that she has the last word in the play, an epiphany of self-awareness. Walter Younger is the main character in *A Raisin in the Sun* as are Anna Fierling in *Mother Courage*, the Young Woman in *Machinal*, Prior Walter in *Angels in America*, and Berniece in *The Piano Lesson*. Their capacity for self-awareness may or may not be actualized in the plot, but their potential for self-awareness is one of the chief features that draw attention to them and identify them at once as protagonists.

Most plays may be considered biographies of one individual, but a play could contain more than one complex, entirely developed character; that is, more than one character fully capable of self-awareness. Identifying the protagonist in such plays can be problematical. Is *Death of a Salesman* about Willy or Biff? Is *The Wild Duck* about Gregers or Hjalmar? Is *Tartuffe* about Tartuffe or Orgon? Who is the protagonist in *Three Sisters*, or indeed is there one in the accepted sense? At any rate, even if there is an identifiable protagonist, there may be more than one character capable of self-awareness.

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Relationships

The primary relationship is that of the protagonist and antagonist. Secondary relationships are those of the protagonist and antagonist with other characters. Although secondary relationships can be as exciting and entertaining as the primary relationship, nonetheless they are technically subordinate for reasons of thematic focus and unity of expression. For example, Oedipus has secondary relationships with Creon and Jocasta; these relationships, however, are a direct outcome of his primary relationship with Tiresias. Walter Younger and his mother have secondary relationships with Ruth, Beneatha, and Bobo. Walter and Mama are not always on stage together, but the

primacy of their relationship is developed by implication throughout these secondary relationships. In *American Buffalo*, Don has a secondary relationship with Bob, while the primary relationship, the one that governs the meaning of the play, is that of Don and Teach.

Of course, there are differences of opinion about the concept of relationships. Artistic sensibility and contemporary mindedness presume that no single understanding of a play is fixed forever. Individual productions need to be single-minded in their particular interpretation, of course, but apart from that, interpretations can and probably should be diverse. It is true that some non-traditional primary relationship choices are little more than entertaining or thought-provoking departures from tradition. But theatre is not science. There is no law against a fresh understanding of the primary relationship, assuming it is based on a careful appraisal of the play and consistent with the sense of the production as a whole. A fair understanding of *Hamlet*, for example, might suggest other options for the primary relationship—Hamlet and his deceased father, Hamlet and Horatio, Hamlet and Laertes, Hamlet and Fortinbras, or (according to playwright Tom Stoppard) not even Hamlet and anyone else, but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. What about the relationship between Walter and his deceased father in *A Raisin in the Sun*? Or between Jake and his dead father, or Jake and his brother Frankie, or Jake and his mother Lorraine in *A Lie of the Mind*? All these are options, and yet they are all based on a careful assessment of the information in the plays themselves. As always, the key to identifying the main relationship is careful analysis.

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Character in Nonrealistic Plays

At the beginning of the chapter, we saw that character is a distinctive pattern of actions, or what Aristotle called habitual action. But action cannot exist in a vacuum; it must be performed by actor-characters within a social frame of reference. In realistic and historical plays, these actor-characters perform actions based on plausible everyday behavior. However, in nonrealistic plays, their actions are not based on everyday behavior but instead on an idea, the main idea. Plausible everyday behavior is not neglected, of course, or the play would be arbitrary and incomprehensible. Even extreme examples of nonrealism, such as *Machinal* and *Happy Days* among the study plays, rely on characters performing plausible everyday activities. The point is that characters in nonrealistic plays are less dependent on the realistic plausibility of their behavior than on the correspondence of their

behavior with the play's main idea. It is this emphasis on the main idea instead of realistic behavior that gives nonrealistic characters the freedom to behave in the surprising ways they do. To some extent, of course, everything in an effective play is influenced by the main idea. What we are talking about here is a matter of degree. Characters in standard plays *tend* to be governed more by plausible everyday behavior than by an idea, whereas those in nonrealistic plays *tend* to be governed more by an idea than by believable everyday behavior.

The main idea in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is "the impossibility of certainty." This idea is dramatized through a farcical treatment in which Guildenstern is obsessed with certainty, Rosencrantz is submissive to uncertainty, the Tragedians make a living from uncertainty, and Hamlet is able to transform uncertainty into tragedy. The main idea in *The Birthday Party* is "abuse of power." This idea is dramatized through a mysterious treatment in which Goldberg and McCann possess a secret power which Stanley attempts to escape from, Petey meekly protests against, and Meg blithely ignores. *Angels in America* is about "the disintegration of outdated social, political, and religious ideals." This idea is dramatized through a fantastic style in which Joe Pitt and Louis Ironson struggle with deeply held personal ideals, Harper Pitt falls to the wayside as a helpless victim of misguided ideals, Roy Cohn defends his cynical ideals and dies in the process, Rabbi Chemelwitz is pragmatic about his religious ideals, while Belize is without the narrow-minded idealism of the other characters and is, therefore, able to adjust to the world as it is becoming. In *Top Girls*, the characters are dramatized variants of "materialistic ambition"—whether for, against, or trapped within it.

In nonrealistic plays, characters are primarily poetic or metaphoric embodiments of the main idea. They may explain themselves or not, and even if they attempt to do so, their reasoning may not be readily apparent. Moreover, characters in nonrealistic plays are typically not complex in the technical sense. Character and main idea are a single entity, a mutual embodiment of the play's fictional reality.

Summary

Character is a habitual pattern of action identified with a specific figure. **Objectives** are what a character wants to accomplish from event to event. **The super-objective** is what a character wants to achieve for the whole play. **Action** is the forcing behavior characters direct toward others to achieve their objectives. Sometimes the term *action* is augmented by the adjective dramatic—dramatic action—to

emphasize the fact that action is always goal oriented. **Adaptations** are the psychological and physical ingenuities characters use in adjusting themselves to one another in a variety of relationships and as an aid in carrying out an objective. **Conflict** refers to the obstacles characters encounter as they attempt to fulfill their desires. **Internal conflicts** are those arising from abstract ideas such as nature, social conventions, destiny, history, government, etc. **External conflicts** are those occurring when one character's objectives stand in the way of other characters attempting to fulfill their own objectives. **Willpower** is the specific combination of determination and self-discipline that a character uses to accomplish an objective. **Values** are the ethical beliefs that shape the characters' opinions about good and bad, right and wrong. **Personality traits** are the internal and external features that set a character apart from others. **Complexity** refers to a character's capacity for self-knowledge within the fictional reality of the play. **Character types** show a single personality trait, mental state, feeling, or action, throughout the play. **Intermediate characters** possess a limited consciousness of the circumstances in which they find themselves. **Complex characters** are intensely conscious of the circumstances in which they find themselves. The **primary relationship** is that of the protagonist and antagonist. **Secondary relationships** are those of the protagonist and antagonist with other characters.

Exercises for a Scene or Short Play

1. **Objectives.** Determine the super-objectives for the protagonist and antagonist. Talk about features of the physical production that would express these particular super-objectives. Look for their secondary objectives for a selection of units. Talk about elements of the physical production that would point up or counterpoint these specific secondary objectives.
2. **Conflicts.** Look for an event where the super-objectives of the protagonist and antagonist come into open conflict. Talk about features of the physical production that would point up or counterpoint the particular conflict of objectives in this event, and about elements of the physical production that would point up or counterpoint this particular type of conflict.
3. **Willpower.** Look for evidence about the willpower of the protagonist, antagonist, and supporting characters. Talk about features of the physical production that would point up or counterpoint the gradations of willpower in these characters.

4. **Values.** Look for the values of the protagonist, antagonist, and supporting characters. Talk about features of the physical production that would point up or counterpoint the particular values of each of these characters.
5. **Personality traits.** Look for personality traits revealed by the characters in a selected event. Compare and contrast the personality traits of a particular character in two scenes. Talk about features of the physical production that would point up or counterpoint specific personality traits of these characters.
6. **Complexity.** Look for evidence about the complexity of the protagonist, antagonist, and supporting characters. Talk about features of the physical production that would point up or counterpoint the complexity of each of these characters.
7. **Relationships.** Look for the primary relationship, i.e., that of the protagonist and the antagonist. Talk about features of the physical production that would point up or counterpoint the primary relationship. Look for another relationship that could be credibly interpreted as primary. Look at one of the secondary relationships and its relation to the primary relationship. Talk about features of the physical production that would point up or counterpoint the specified secondary relationship.
8. **Following Action Analysis.** Look for each character's point of view toward the play's seed. How do their specific points of view help to identify them as particular characters? How does specifying each character's point of view toward the seed contribute to the coherence of the play as a whole?

Idea

Idea

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The word *idea* comes from a Greek source, meaning the inner form of a thing as opposed to its physical reality. From this root comes the current meaning of a thought or a mental image. To some extent, idea has already been discussed in connection with given circumstances, background story, plot, and character. Earlier chapters treated how each of these elements related to idea, but not necessarily the concept itself. This chapter will concentrate on idea as one of the basic elements of drama.

Many writers think of idea in drama in connection with idea plays, sometimes called problem plays, thesis plays, propaganda plays, or social dramas. These plays treat topical questions from a didactic, or instructional, point of view and offer or at least suggest a solution. George Bernard Shaw originated a type of idea play called the discussion play, in which current social, political, or economic issues are openly debated as an integral part of the play's action.

Although idea plays and discussion plays aim at social reform, the concept of idea under consideration here is broader than that. In this chapter, **idea refers to the thoughts and thought patterns expressed in the play**. All plays have ideas in them—but we should stress that their ideas are not always as meaningful as those found in *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, *The Wild Duck*, or *The Lower Depths*, for instance. Ideas are most important in serious plays and satires. Ideas appear in comedies, too, but in these plays, character and plot are more important. Idea is least important in farce and old-fashioned melodrama. However, the playwrights associated with Theatre of the Absurd even managed to invest farce with intellectual significance.

According to critic Francis Fergusson, the main idea “points to the object which the dramatist is trying to show us, and we must in some sense grasp that if we are to understand his complex art” (1949: 230). In other words, the main idea identifies the path that script analysis and subsequent artistic work should take. The main idea lays the foundation for intelligent discussion about a play, which is indispensable for effective communication among the members of the production team.

Differences of opinion about the function of the main idea highlight one of the significant differences between studying plays for performance and for intellectual study alone. For despite the centrality of the main idea in script analysis, it is rarely the exclusive focus in production. Theatre is principally an emotional experience, and the intellectual meaning in most plays seldom provides sufficient entertainment value in itself. The main idea does illuminate character and plot, however, which themselves provide most of the entertainment value. Accordingly, actors, directors, and designers need to guard against the belief that playwrights—at any rate, most realistic and historical playwrights—think their plays are meant solely to demonstrate intellectual issues. The main idea is hardly ever imposed on a play by the author but instead is formed from within the action. Nonrealistic plays have a different perspective on this question, which will be discussed later.

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Plays express the main idea directly in the words of the characters and/or indirectly through the plot and characters. The main idea in *Death of a Salesman* and *The Lower Depths* is expressed directly through particular statements in the dialogue. The same may be said of *Tartuffe*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Angels in America*, and *Hamlet*. On the other hand, the main idea in *American Buffalo* is expressed indirectly through the play’s action. The same is true for *A Lie of the Mind* and *Three Sisters*. Intellectual issues as such are not immediately apparent in these plays. Nevertheless, the use of one approach does not exclude the use of the other at the same time or even in the same play.

Idea in the Words

The verbal devices for expressing the main idea include titles, discussions, sayings, allusions, set speeches, imagery, and symbolism. In some plays, the impulse to talk about the main idea is so strong that the plot seems merely a pretext for discussion of intellectual issues—for example, in the plays of Shaw or Stoppard. Characters talk about intellectual subjects in such a way that their words could

almost be removed intact from the dialogue and used for a composition on particular ideas from the play. But most playwrights do not use this approach. Instead, they integrate discussions about or references to the main idea within the dialogue so that a feeling of convincing, realistic speech and behavior is maintained. Playwrights may occasionally turn their attention to intellectual issues, but they seldom overlook the vital need for dialogue to advance the plot and reveal character.

Titles

Titles are likely to express the main idea or associations with it. The title of *A Raisin in the Sun* is from a poem by Langston Hughes about frustrated dreams. The titles of *The Wild Duck*, *Happy Days*, *A Lie of the Mind*, *The Piano Lesson*, and *Mother Courage* indicate their main ideas by implication. The critical task with implications, of course, is interpreting them within the proper frame of reference. Is the title meant to be taken as a factual reference, metaphorically, or ironically? Often a title points merely to the main character of the play as in *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*. A title that refers to both the main idea and main character is *Death of a Salesman*. Salesman Willy Loman is the main character of the play, but the title also points by implication to main idea. We would expect a formal phrase like "The Death of . . ." to refer to a famous person such as a member of royalty or a renowned artist. However, a salesman is an ordinary person, an illustration of the so-called common man. Miller's decision to emphasize the word salesman (average businessman) instead of someone customarily more noteworthy is a clue to the main idea of the play. The titles of *Machinal*, *The School for Scandal*, *The Lower Depths* (Russian: *At the Bottom*), and *Angels in America* were chosen as much for their curiosity value as their ability to connect with the main idea.

Discussions

Discussions are sustained conversations about specific ideas. When discussions emerge in the dialogue, the principle of artistic unity insists that the ideas under discussion will relate in some significant way to the play's main idea. As mentioned earlier, such features are a characteristic of discussion plays, but examples may occur in any sort of play. In *Oedipus Rex*, Sophocles included discussions about the capriciousness of the gods, the nature of political power, the role of chance in human affairs, and the credibility of oracles. Shakespeare is not considered a playwright whose plays are

dominated by discussions of ideas as such. However, he included discussions about a wide assortment of ideas in *Hamlet*. Some of them deal with the nature of grief, love, duty, afterlife, revenge, Providence, indecision, ennui, ambition, suicide, acting, public office, forgiveness, honor, and guilt. The impoverished characters in *The Lower Depths* discuss love and marriage, behavioral correctness, physiology, labor relations, ambition, linguistics, literature, destiny, education, spirituality, human rights, morality, and more. Indeed, practically all they do is talk about ideas. *The Piano Lesson* contains discussions about ethical issues in the form of homespun anecdotes.

Discussions exist in comedies as well as in serious plays. Discussions about religious principles and tolerance in *Tartuffe* have already been pointed out. In *The School for Scandal*, there are discussions about reputation, literary fashion, and class relations. Discussions may not always point directly to the main idea, but they can show the way through careful consideration of their content and the circumstances in which they occur.

Sayings

Sayings are brief, quotable statements that compress human experience into a concise verbal generality. For example, architect Miës van der Rohe's observation, "God is in the details," is a saying, as is Thoreau's "It is never too late to give up your prejudices." Unlike the discussions explained earlier, sayings are not mini-debates or explanations of a character's beliefs. They are brief remarks about general principles.

Sophocles used a number of sayings in *Oedipus Rex*. Some of the notable ones are:

- There is no fairer duty than that of helping others in distress.
- No man can judge the rough unknown or trust in second sight, for wisdom changes hands among the wise.
- Time, and time alone, will show the just man, though scoundrels are discovered in a day.

Hamlet's penchant for sayings is one of his character traits:

- Frailty, thy name is woman.
- Foul deeds will rise, though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes.
- That one can smile and smile and be a villain.
- To be or not to be, that is the question.

He takes such pleasure in sayings that he writes them down in his table book, which was a personal accessory that Elizabethan gentlemen kept handy for this purpose: “My tables—meet it is I set it down / That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain.”

The value of sayings in illuminating the main idea depends not only on the context but also on the acuteness and credibility of the speaking character. When a deceitful character utters a saying, for example, it can express an opposite meaning from what was intended by the speaker. In *Hamlet*, for example, Polonius is also fond of sayings. His famous farewell advice to Laertes is sometimes cited out of context as a group of model sayings about ethical behavior. Knowing what a hypocrite Polonius is, however, it is hard to take him seriously when he says things like “To thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.”

In modern plays, sayings are often distinguished by irony, conveying a meaning opposite to their literal sense. In *Mother Courage*, Brecht uses sayings ironically in the form of humorous folk sayings:

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- If you want the war to work for you, you’ve got to give the war its due.
- On the whole, you can say that victory amid defeat cost us plain people plenty.
- The best thing for us is when politics gets bogged down.

A humorous and ironic saying appears in *Angels in America* when Rabbi Isador Chemelwitz declines to hear Louis Ironson give vent to his feelings of guilt from abandoning his ailing partner. The saying is underlined.

RABBI ISADOR CHEMELWITZ. You want to confess,
better you should find a priest.

LOUIS. But I’m not a Catholic, I’m a Jew.

RABBI ISADOR CHEMELWITZ. Worse luck for you
bubbalah. Catholics believe in forgiveness;
Jews believe in guilt.

Astute readers will find in this saying a clue about the different worldviews expressed in part 1 and part 2 of this remarkable play. Dramatists employ sayings in this way to highlight specific ideas that form subtle patterns of meaning in a play.

Allusions

Allusions are references to persons, places, or things outside the play. It is a way of sending an idea-signal to listening characters but also to the more knowledgeable members of the audience. Not everyone in attendance may recognize these allusions. On the other hand, those who do so are rewarded with the pleasure of additional insights. Historically, the most frequent mentions came from religion, classical literature, history, and mythology. Today there may be a variety of such references in a play, including many that refer to current affairs, consumer culture, and popular entertainment.

Sometimes allusions may be a challenge to recognize, but their use is meant for more than mind games. In the hands of a skilled playwright, allusions enlarge the intellectual scope of a play. The Yellow Dog much talked about in *The Piano Lesson* is a piece of Southern folklore that refers to an ill-tempered dog, one that turns on its owner. This has a bearing on Berniece, who appears to be rejecting her heritage. A subtle allusion is found in David Mamet's play *American Buffalo* when Teach sings a tune to himself from *H.M.S. Pinafore*. The fact that this tune is from a comic opera by Gilbert and Sullivan is a clue to the ironic style of the play and to Mamet's droll sense of humor in general. Comparable to other accepted conventions discussed in this chapter, allusions such as these can unite to form a coherent pattern of meaning that points to the main idea, if not directly illuminating it. Moreover, allusions are a practical test of artistic awareness since understanding them depends on our cultural literacy, the knowledge of our shared cultural heritage.

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Set Speeches

Set speeches are formal or methodical speeches that emphasize specific intellectual issues. They stand out from the surrounding dialogue because they are extended and composed like operatic arias, court pleadings, or arguments at a formal debate. There may be one or several set speeches (or none) in a play, touching on a variety of subjects and viewpoints. In all cases, however, they embody at that moment the thematic essence of the scene or play, accenting the general meaning in addition to the particular moment.

Because of their formal workmanship, set speeches appear more often in classic plays, where formal language is the norm. Laertes' admonition to Ophelia in 1,3 of *Hamlet*, in which he warns her against expecting too much from Hamlet's affections, is partly a set

speech. In the context of saying goodbye to his sister, he explains the weighty responsibilities of kingship in general. Laertes' speech changes the episode from that of particular characters to the general political environment of the play. There are three noticeable set speeches in *Tartuffe*. The first two appear together in Act 1 when Cleante describes the ideal traits of a religious person, and the third takes place at the end of the play when the Officer pays tribute to the wisdom and generosity of the King.

Set speeches are rare in realistic plays because their apparent formality can interfere with the need to sustain realistic plausibility. Unless they are analyzed carefully, they can appear mawkish, over-sentimental, or affected. Modern playwrights tend to introduce compensating features to overcome this possibility. Arthur Miller managed to include one each by Linda ("attention must be paid . . .") and Charley ("No one dast blame this man . . .") in *Death of a Salesman*. The first occurs when Linda is justifiably upset about Biff and Happy abandoning their father in a restaurant so they could be with their girlfriends. The second happens in the epilogue, where the characters are gathered to say some final words at Willy Loman's gravesite. In the context of *American Buffalo's* clipped dialogue, a rather long line by Teach near the end of the play could be considered a set speech. It is formally written and openly expresses the main idea of the play, but it is darkly ironic because the speaker himself is a prime example of what he is railing against. Notice the use of capital letters, too, which underlines this sense. Here Teach is upset when he learns that Bob has actually been lying about the whole setup.

TEACH. [...] The Whole Entire World

(TEACH picks up the dead-pig-sticker and
starts trashing the junk shop)

There Is No Law.

There Is No Right And Wrong.

The World Is Lies.

Every Fucking Thing.

(Pause.)

Every God-forsaken Thing.

DON. Calm down, Walt.

TEACH. We all live like cavemen.

Because set speeches call attention to the intellectual issues in a play, they can be dependable sources of information about the main idea if they are treated attentively. Moreover, as openings into the heart

of the play, they also provide excellent acting opportunities. Set speeches are more extended than adjacent statements, are formally written to achieve specific emotional effects, and emphasize crucial issues in the play.

Imagery

Imagery refers to the use of sensory language in reference to objects, actions, or ideas. "The air smells sweet." "I wandered lonely as a cloud." By expressing issues in sensory form like this, imagery increases our resources for understanding plays. Imagery can be expressed in several ways. A *simile* is a figure of speech in which two dissimilar things are explicitly compared: "She is like a rose." A *metaphor* is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase that ordinarily designates one thing is used to designate another: "A mighty fortress is our God." *Personification* represents an inanimate object, creature, or abstraction as a person: "Art is a jealous mistress." And *assonance* is a resemblance of sound in words or syllables: "June Moon."

G. Wilson Knight (*The Wheel of Fire*, 1930) and Caroline Spurgeon (*Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us*, 1935) have found that imagery plays an influential role in Shakespeare's plays. *Hamlet*, for example, contains many images of decay. Note Marcellus's line (1,4,90): "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." (A fish rots from the head down, and the leadership of Denmark is corrupt.) Various post-apocalyptic images are found in *Happy Days*, and imagery about necessary physical activities is apparent in *Mother Courage*. Images of frontier America can be found throughout *A Lie of the Mind*.

Apart from intellectual knowledge, imagery, like music, appeals directly to the imagination. As such it plays a crucial role for designers in their development of the physical production. Incorporating a play's imagery through the physical production has the potential to illuminate a broad range of feelings and ideas from the play in fresh ways, evoking a sense of the whole often more effectively than dialogue or performance.

Symbols

A symbol is something that represents or stands for something else. The word itself comes from a Greek verb meaning "to throw together," and its noun form means a mark or a sign. Unlike a metaphor, which compares two different things, a symbol automatically associates something with itself. Symbols vary in complexity and purpose, of course, but we only need to consider two kinds for script analysis. *Intentional*

symbols are those in which there is a direct equation (scales=justice, owl=wisdom), either because of a traditionally accepted meaning or because they are designated frankly as a symbol in the play. *Incidental symbols*, by contrast, originate from readers and are subject to change according to their sensibilities.

Frequently, an author who uses intentional symbols slips them in cunningly. If they stand out too strongly, their handling will feel like a sermon or book report instead of a play. But in the hands of a skilled playwright, intentional symbols can enrich by new associations, working like allusions or imagery, except more noticeable and therefore more potent. By evoking abstract ideas and feelings in concrete form, intentional symbols function as direct connections between the play and the outside world. Many times they can expose an idea, and reveal it more quickly and emphatically, than other elements.

The wild duck in the play of the same name is an example of an intentional symbol. We learn from the play that when a Scandinavian wild duck is wounded, it does not try to escape but dives into the water and clings to the weeds on the bottom. We also learn that a wild duck is tamed without difficulty and thrives in captivity, despite its name. Notice that Gregers Werle, the radical idealist, is the one who designates the wild duck as a symbol of Hjalmar Ekdal when he says to him in Act 2, "I almost think you have something of the wild duck in you." Idealists, Ibsen seems to be saying, like to find symbols of their ideals in the world around them. The symbol of the wild duck reinforces behavior patterns that Gregers thinks he sees in Hjalmar. According to Gregers, the wild duck represents Hjalmar's inability to cope with the misfortunes in his life. He also believes that Hjalmar has forsaken his youthful ideals for a comfortable existence. The meaning of the wild duck is evident because the playwright has intentionally described it as such in the story.

Other intentional symbols in the study plays are the office machines in *Machinal*, Mama's potted plant in *A Raisin in the Sun*, the pregnant ant in *Happy Days*, Anna Fierling's canteen wagon in *Mother Courage*, the spinning top that Fedotik gives to Irina in *Three Sisters*, the piano in *The Piano Lesson*, Bethesda Fountain in *Angels in America*, and the name Oedipus (wounded foot) in *Oedipus Rex*.

What was stated above about the relation of imagery to physical production also holds true for symbols. Intentional symbols by definition go straight to the imagination, often calling to mind specific elements of the future physical production. Apart from being practical, accurate, and attractive, production values that take advantage of this fact can be more effective as well. That is, physical production

invested with symbols (and imagery) from the play evokes intangible, experiences, further inducing a feeling of the whole.

Prologue and Epilogue

The prologue and epilogue are additional literary devices used for presenting the main idea directly. A **prologue (the speech before)** is a small scene, formally separate from the play, in which the main idea is subtly introduced. An **epilogue (the speech after)** summarizes the main idea by restating it at the end of the play within a broader context. In a classical Greek tragedy such as *Oedipus Rex*, the prologue and epilogue frame the action according to what was then accepted dramatic form. They highlight the main idea by their characteristics as formal openings and closings and through the words of the Chorus. The Requiem at the end of *Death of a Salesman* is an official epilogue with a similar function. The nature of the funeral scene leads us to expect a summing up, which we find there in the words of Linda, Biff, Happy, and Charley.

Idea in the Characters

The main idea can also be expressed through particular types of conventional characters; for example, narrators like the Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*; normative characters like Belize, the nurse, in *Angels in America*; confidants like Charley, Willy's neighbor in *Death of a Salesman*; and the Chorus in *Oedipus Rex*. Communicating the main idea in with conventional characters like these entails certain technical restrictions, however, because characters cannot speak openly about the play's meaning too often without straining plausibility. Thus, conventional characters may only say what is permitted within the limits of their identities and while addressing other characters. With these limits in mind, however, over time particular conventional characters have developed that may embody the main idea without straining logic or entertainment value. It is essential to understand that these conventional characters do not appear all the time or in every play. Moreover, if and when such characters appear, there is no rule against them fulfilling several playwriting functions at the same time.

All the same, readers should not depend too much even on these conventional characters to learn about idea, for that practice comes close to the intentional fallacy discussed in the Introduction. Interest in the ideas that characters express and the technical functions some characters carry out should not lead to confusing the characters with the voice of the playwright. Some characters may give emphasis to idea, but in the best plays, they are seldom merely mouthpieces for

the meaning. Characters behave as characters because they are governed first by artistic considerations and only later by technical or intellectual requirements.

Narrator and Chorus

A narrator is a character who adds spoken commentary to the action. A chorus is a group of characters that serve as participants, commentators, or supplements to the action. Because a narrator and chorus by definition always know more about the story than the other characters, they can be helpful sources of information about idea. In *Mother Courage*, Anna Fierling, Eilif, Yvette, and the Chaplain step out of the action several times and speak or sing to the audience as narrators. They communicate ideas from the play through songs, such as “The Song of the Old Wife and the Soldier,” “The Song of Fraternization,” and “The Song of the Great Capitulation.” These songs are about ideas central to the play—romantic heroism, passive acceptance of the status quo, hopeless admission of defeat, and more. The chorus in Greek tragedies also plays dual roles of narrator during the choral odes and citizens of the polis during the episodes. The comments of narrators or choruses are likely to explain something important about idea.

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Raisonneur

The raisonneur (reasoner) is a character who voices aspects of the main idea so as to influence or impress other characters through reasoning. Although participating in the action, the raisonneur has little direct effect on it, thus furnishing this character with objectivity and, usually, credibility. Satine, the gambler in Gorky’s play, *The Lower Depths*, is a classic example. As a veteran resident of the flophouse, he can moralize while maintaining a plausible connection with the story. He is a “realist” who has “seen it all” and soliloquizes, albeit ironically, about the main idea of the play: “illusions at any cost.” Another example of a raisonneur is Dr. Relling in *The Wild Duck*. After his introduction during the lunch scene in Act 3, he appears four more times in the play. He objects to Mrs. Sorby’s marriage plans (they used to be lovers), admonishes Gregers’ misguided idealism, tracks down the missing Hjalmar, and provides medical help for Hedvig. Dr. Relling says that he is “cultivating the life illusion” in others; that is, helping them to be able to live with themselves even with their disappointments. Despite an inclination to moralize, raisonneurs like Satine and Relling are most valuable when they are understood as part of the fictional reality of the play and not just

as sermonizers. For example, as a character, Satine expresses ironic support when other characters are reluctant to live according to their pipe dreams. Dr. Relling expresses similar feelings of resentment when Gregers Werle accuses him of being indifferent to the welfare of their mutual friend, Hjalmar. The words of *raisonneurs* are best understood as expressions of their own beliefs, not merely stuck on to explain the meaning of the play.

Confidant

A confidant(e) is a close friend or associate with whom the main character shares secrets or discusses personal problems. Resembling a *raisonneur*, a confidant has little direct influence on the action even though they always remain within it. Because others open their hearts to this character, the confidant is more often a trusted friend than a skeptical observer like the *raisonneur*. Confidants tend to be well-adjusted characters without serious personal conflicts in respect to the world of the play. In this capacity, confidants want to help the main character adjust to that world. They provide an opportunity for main characters to seek sympathetic help for their problems.

Charley, Willy Loman's next-door neighbor in *Death of a Salesman*, is a typical confidant. In Act 1, Charley listens sympathetically and helps Willy to take his mind off his problems. He genuinely feels sorry for Willy. In Act 2, he gives Willy practical help with offers of money and a job. Other examples of confidants are Horatio in *Hamlet* and Belize in *Angels in America*. By definition, confidants function outside the main action most of the time. This apparent passiveness is offset by their strong desire to help other characters. By offering others a chance to talk in safety about essential ideas, confidants provide support and encouragement unobtainable from anyone else.

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Norm Character

The norm (normative) character is someone who is prudently adjusted to the fictional reality of the play. The norm character is another example of a character that knows more about the situation than the other characters do, but in this case, greater awareness results more from intuitive understanding than from direct knowledge. Norm characters do not appear in every play. They appear most often in comedies, where their common sense serves as a reference point against which to compare the eccentric behavior of other characters. Playwrights know that eccentricity is illumined best if it is displayed against a background of cheerful common sense.

The norm character in *The Lower Depths* is the Tartar: "Do not do harm unto others—such is the law"; that is to say, not pipe dreams or censure but righteousness. In *Tartuffe*, the norm character is Orgon's wife, Elmire. Despite Madame Pernelle's unsympathetic opinion of her, Elmire is sensibly adjusted to the capricious standards of her society. She is independent-minded, tolerant, and clever in the ways of the world, and, above all, good-natured. For Elmire religion (the main obstacle in the play) is a private matter, not a commodity for public discussion or a hoax to defraud people of their money. Although Elmire strongly disapproves of Tartuffe, she does not overreact by overtly condemning him. Tartuffe is a clever character, after all, and trying to expose him publicly could backfire (and does backfire when Damis tries to unmask him). Instead, she attempts to set Orgon free from his obsessive hero-worship by leading Tartuffe to expose his own hypocrisy. This is one part of her super-objective, which might be "to return the family's life back to normal, the way it used to be before Orgon became obsessed with Tartuffe." Notice the importance of normalcy in the super-objective of this norm character.

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In *The School for Scandal*, Rowley performs the dual functions of norm character and confidant, as does Charley in *Death of a Salesman*. Mrs. Sorby is the norm character in *The Wild Duck*, as is Joseph Asagai in *A Raisin in the Sun*. For sound dramatic reasons, norm characters are of central importance in their plays. A crucial point is that they are too intelligent to be pressured by social conventions. And since they do not take themselves too seriously either, they often display a well-developed sense of humor. They are attractive characters in themselves, not colorless or dull, or else the meaning of the play is liable to be insufficiently played up.

Having reviewed the ways playwrights present the main idea through the characters, we should still be careful about assuming that any characters in themselves point inevitably to the main idea. This does not mean that characters never say anything trustworthy. It is just that they have their own objectives, and what they say is shaped by those objectives from moment to moment. Their words may be appropriate in one set of circumstances, yet they may not explain the entire play all the time.

Idea in the Plot

Playwright Thornton Wilder said that playwriting springs from an automatic linkage between idea and action. To this extent, no matter

how intellectual a play may seem on the surface, the main idea is presented most persuasively through the plot, the arrangement of the actions. Plot is the primary expressive system of drama. Just as conventions in the dialogue and characters can express idea, so also can particular conventions in the plot.

Parallelism

Parallelism matches characters with other characters to reinforce connecting ideas through repetition and/or contrast. Parallelism in this sense calls attention to the main idea or associations with it.

Shakespeare often used parallelism to point up the main idea in his plays. An analysis of *Hamlet*, for example, reveals a number of parallelisms linking the characters of Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras. The fathers of Hamlet and Fortinbras are both deceased warrior-kings, while their sons are both princes and rightful heirs to the throne, yet neither one holds the throne of his country as by rights they should. Polonius, by contrast, is a pale reflection of these two fathers. There are, or were, close relationships between all these fathers and sons: between Hamlet and King Hamlet, Fortinbras and King Fortinbras, and Laertes and Polonius. Hamlet has embarked on a course of revenge for his father's murder. For similar reasons, Fortinbras threatens to retake lands his father lost to Denmark and Poland, and Laertes threatens to revenge the killing of Polonius. The characters involved in such parallelisms are considered *foils* for one another, meaning they point out significant features of each other. From these and other connections, it seems clear that Laertes, Fortinbras, and Hamlet can be considered mutual foils. All three seek to revenge the deaths of their fathers. Fortinbras is self-aware and unshakable in his task. Laertes is boastful and imprudent. Hamlet is idealistic and impulsive, which points up the fact that he is more poet than soldier. These parallelisms also highlight the complex personality traits Hamlet displays compared to those few simple traits displayed by Fortinbras and Laertes.

Parallelism appears in modern plays too. In *The Wild Duck*, the activities of the Werle and Ekdal families constitute parallelisms. The main idea expresses itself through the different ideals of Gregers and Hjalmar and through their relationships with their parents, above all with their fathers, although the feminine influence is not lacking either. Three parallelisms in *Death of a Salesman* also reinforce the relations between fathers and sons: Willy and Biff, Charley and Bernard, and the founder of the Wagner Company and his

son Howard. The sub-plots indicate that father-son relations reinforce issues associated with the main idea. The two families in *A Lie of the Mind* form apparent parallelisms and their connections are brought to our attention by the alternating construction of the plot. The question is, what should be compared or contrasted about these two families and how does it help us to understand the play? The same question arises with *Angels in America* in the parallelism between Harper and Joe Pitt on one hand and Prior Walter and Louis Ironson on the other. Of course, readers should not look for parallelisms all the time or in every play, but whenever parallelisms can be accurately identified, readers would be justified in studying them for clues about idea.

Internal Conflict

Internal (intellectual) conflicts are those arising from abstract ideas such as nature, social conventions, destiny, history, etc. Consider the main idea that can be drawn from the internal conflicts in *American Buffalo*. At first reading, petty criminal behavior appears to be the sole interest in the play, but closer analysis reveals an internal conflict: devotion to an ideal that clashes with the play's fictional reality. Don is devoted to the thinking and methods of professional crime as distinguished from amateurish crime. In some ways, he is dedicated more to the idea of professionalism than to the actual criminal act of theft. He esteems Teach because he believes him to be professionally skilled at what he does, stealing. But Teach only talks about professionalism. At heart, he is a violent and selfish petty crook who cloaks the stupidity of his behavior in the disguise of professional craftsmanship. Don learns this lesson when Teach makes a mess of their scheme to steal the rare coins, trashes Don's shop, and critically injures Bob. Don's idealism clouded his thinking and blinded him to the truth of Teach's behavior. Don has fallen in love with an idea and therefore allowed his life and Bob's to be thrown away, an internal conflict that goes to the heart of the play. In the form of ignorant idealism, this idea often appears in public life as well, unfortunately. Combined with the supporting tensions of crime and violence, *American Buffalo* offers a plentiful supply of internal tensions. By setting the play within an intellectual context larger than itself, internal conflicts can contribute to the kind of directing and physical production that helps to theatricalize the main idea in its original entirety.

Main Climax

The main climax is the most important event (turning point) in the plot. It is that point where all the parts of the play converge, thus exposing the main idea in its most concrete form. All the essential forces of the play are at work here. Indeed, the quality of a play's main climax is judged by how well it fulfills these functions.

This principle may be explained by studying a textbook-perfect example in detail. In *The Wild Duck*, the main climax occurs almost at the end of the play. Hedvig has just killed herself, but it is the various responses to her death that actually form the main climax. Old Ekdal attributes her death to forest demons. He flees into the garret to console himself with pipe dreams and liquor. Reverend Molvik is always drunk anyway. He mumbles a few prayers over Hedvig's body, but this gesture is embarrassing rather than consoling. Hjalmar Ekdal, Hedvig's father, reacts in his usual way by thinking of himself first. When Dr. Relling tries to comfort Hjalmar by assuring him that Hedvig's death was painless, Hjalmar uses the moment as an opportunity for narcissistic self-dramatization: "And I! I hunted her from me like an animal . . . She crept terrified into the garret and died for love of me!" Misguided idealist Gregers Werle interprets Hedvig's death as a symbolic validation of his mission in life. "Hedvig has not died in vain," he says to Dr. Relling, "Didn't you see how sorrow set free what is noble in him [Hjalmar]?" Relling, for his part, scoffs at this. He warns Gregers that even Hedvig's suicide will not change Hjalmar's juvenile selfishness, but Gregers refuses to believe it. "If you are right and I am wrong," he says, "then life is not worth living." But Relling sees things more skeptically. He recognizes that Hedvig's death has become little more than an opportunity for extravagant self-pity in Hjalmar. In addition, he knows that Hedvig would not have died if Gregers had not misled Hjalmar with his foolish notions of "the call for the ideal."

The death of an innocent child is always a heartbreaking event. It should draw out natural feelings of sorrow and remorse in the characters and the audience. The family picture Ibsen provides at the climax of *The Wild Duck*, however, is one of drunkenness, petty vanity, and thoughtless insensitivity. Gregers had hoped to inspire Hjalmar with renewed idealism; instead, he has had the opposite effect. This climax shows through real human behavior that Gregers is a dangerous type of misguided idealist. Indeed, he is like Hamlet in his reckless idealism. Although Relling provides a few critical

remarks about the situation, Ibsen has chosen to express the main idea of the play theatrically; that is, through the actions and attitudes of the characters. Notice as well that Dr. Relling can only talk about the others' indifference to suffering; long ago he lost the ability to feel anything himself. He can only stand by and watch. Ibsen shows that behind every authoritative assertion of ideals, including Relling's, stands an insecure psyche.

The climax of *A Lie of the Mind* is another textbook-perfect example. Three moments at or near the end of the play offer options for the main climax: the moment when Lorraine learns from Sally, her daughter, that her son Jake murdered his father; the moment when Baylor kisses Meg, thereby reversing their uncaring relationship; and the moment when Jake relinquishes his wife, Beth, to the care of his sympathetic brother Frankie. Sam Shepard described this play as "a love ballad . . . a little legend about love." Which moment best expresses Shepard's statement most strongly in terms of human behavior? Studying the main climax can help to show how the main idea works in the theatre. It shows that idea in drama is not an abstract literary concept but rather the philosophy of the play expressed in terms of concrete human action.

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The Main Idea

We have shown that playwrights transform ideas into concrete human experience. They do this by putting the characters through a controlled series of events intended to illustrate a specific view of the world. Suitably theatricalized, this series of actions induces audiences to feel as the characters do in the dramatic circumstances given. The result is that even though the dramatist is not there in person, the *main idea* is understood by the actors, director, designers, and audience as an obvious if unstated conclusion. **Thus, the main idea is the thought pattern expressed by the entire presented experience of the play.** (Similar to "theme" in Chapter 1.) Furthermore, since most plays are "biographies" of the main character, it is he/she that by default forms the principal focus of this experience. While we're on the subject, the main idea should not be confused with the *production concept*, which is an original idea, design, or plan for performing a play and governing its physical production. The main idea is an intellectual matter present in the play itself. Ideally, a production concept emerges from a sound understanding of a play's main idea.

To be studied for itself the main idea must be converted from its performative expression in the play into some type of verbal

understanding. This is done by applying a process of radical reduction to the entire play so as to disclose its underlying form. An automobile, for example, stripped to its bare frame is still recognized functionally as an automobile. Though most of the details have been removed, it still retains its underlying form. Its other parts are extensions and elaborations of this basic framework. Similarly, the main idea represents the essence of the underlying intellectual structure that unites all the elements of the play. This process of extreme reduction is more than an academic exercise; it is artistically essential. By verbalizing the main idea in a simple, condensed way, it remains as close as possible to its performative expression in the play. As soon as minor qualifications (more words) are added, information comes in that tends to obscure the main idea's necessary clarity. Moreover, whenever the formulation of the main idea is too drawn out or contains too many conditions, there is a strong chance that some misunderstanding exists about the play at the primary level.

Radical reduction of the main idea comes after the fact; that is, when the playwright's work is already finished. However, there are wide differences in the working methods of playwrights. For some, writing is an intellectual experience, planned and worked out through careful logic. For others, writing is an intuitive experience. And there are many gradations of working methods in between. Whatever the case, most playwrights do not create their works backward; that is, they do not begin with an intellectual conception of the play's meaning and then work back to the finished play. In the initial stages of work, most playwrights have only an incomplete awareness of what they have written, at least in intellectual terms. Nonetheless, this does not mean their finished plays lack coherent main ideas. Nor does it lessen the importance of the main idea for the creative needs of actors, directors, and designers, who, after all, are the fortunate recipients and therefore facilitators of the playwright's finished work.

Although there are no fixed rules governing how to state the main idea in reduced form, in Formalist Analysis it is typically expressed as an action summary, thesis sentence, or theme. No single method has any particular advantage over any other, and any or all of them may be used for just about any play.

An action summary is a concise statement of the play's primary action. Actor Laurence Olivier employed an action summary for his film version of *Hamlet* as "the story of a man who could not make up his mind." Olivier's main idea highlights the psychological dimensions of the play, while discounting its social and political implications.

A thesis statement is a single declarative sentence that asserts a lesson about the play. For example, Ibsen may have written *The Wild Duck* to demonstrate that “impractical idealists always go wrong,” or Brecht may have written *Mother Courage* to show that “capitalism destroys human feeling.” *Three Sisters* may be a demonstration that “love always gives back much less than we expect,” and *Angels in America* is evidence that “freedom that fails to grow will not last.” These examples show that a thesis statement is often useful for highlighting social or political issues.

A theme is an expression of the main idea in abstract universal terms. For example, the theme of *Machinal* might be “a struggle for freedom” or that of *Oedipus Rex*, “a quest for truth.” Chapter 1 showed the theme of *Hamlet* as “blind idealism.” Themes seem to work best when they are expressing the broad philosophical and poetic aspects of a play.

All these options are reasonable formulations of the main idea for their respective plays. The logic behind them should be obvious: they are efforts to describe in condensed form the meaning behind the primary conflict of the play, the conflict that centers on the protagonist and antagonist. Regardless of the type of verbal formulation, it is crucial to state the main idea as a single declarative statement. The main idea will be free from vagueness if its formulation confidently asserts or denies something about the meaning of the play, concisely expressed and without qualifications.

Developing a statement of the main idea is a stern test of artistic awareness because it forces the creative team to determine precisely what it is they want to express with their work. It stimulates ideas about acting, directing, and design, but it also takes considerable practice to acquire the skill needed to define it accurately and concisely. This skill can be nurtured by making a habit of detecting the main idea for any play, film, TV show, or novel one comes across. As previously shown, sometimes the author states the main idea directly in the dialogue. The task then is to find that statement among all the many words in the work. In most cases, however, the main idea is not directly stated and so must be extracted from the action by means of implication. The ability to draw out implications in this way is one of the most challenging skills of script analysis.

Main Idea in Nonrealistic Plays

Nonrealistic plays have developed from the premise that today we sense intuitively how each of us is part of a broader human experience

in the world. Knowingly or unknowingly, in daily life, we consider the past, present, and future of the world as a whole.

To dramatize this collective frame of mind, nonrealistic playwrights seek to place their works within a larger field of reference made up of myths and archetypes, history, dreams, symbols, art, music, literature, popular culture, current events, and all sorts of other sources. On one level, these references draw from the shared meanings essential for cooperation within nations and cultures, from what we call general knowledge or cultural literacy. On another level, they draw from what is known in psychology as the collective unconscious (impressions in the psyche that are always present in everyone everywhere). In nonrealistic plays, this collective viewpoint is intentional.

Samuel Beckett's major plays—*Waiting for Godot*, *Happy Days*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp's Last Tape*—are considered the least dependent on standard plot and character. How is the collective viewpoint achieved in his plays? Realistic and historical plays illustrate the main idea through plot and character, but in Beckett's plays, traditional plot and character are negligible. As a nonrealistic writer, Beckett was not interested in stories about entertaining incidents. Nor was he interested in realistically convincing characters. He was involved in the great myths and archetypes, in histories, great literature, dreams, and symbols, but then—and this was essential for him—all presented in sharp, contemporary form. Accordingly, while plot and character may be negligible in Beckett's plays, the intellectual patterns found in them are always of crucial importance.

In *Happy Days* Beckett evokes this collective impulse through the use of regular interlocking patterns just as Joyce did in his famous novels. Beckett lists no fewer than thirty-eight of these intentional patterns in his production notebook (Beckett, 1985: 25ff.). These thought patterns are what give *Happy Days* its broader significance—and its nonrealistic genius. Like Joyce, Beckett creates his thought patterns less from plot and character than from the physical production and literary sources (word repetitions, myths and archetypes, and literature itself). The patterns create motifs of space, time, habit, memory, inactivity, and change, which examine the play's main idea of "absurd dreams" from different perspectives—approving, sympathetic, ironic, parodic, ridiculous, tragic, farcical, sentimental, etc. It is essential to recognize the play's ultimate response to its theme is intentionally equivocal, not as univocal as it might be in a historical and realistic play. In music, theme and variations is a form of composition where an initial theme is stated, and each section thereafter is a modification of that theme. Nonrealistic plays are often composed

along these lines. In *Happy Days* the theme of absurd dreams is stated at the outset through the dialogue, physical production, and acting, and thereafter it forms the background for variations of itself through the numerous motifs listed above.

Happy Days is an excellent example of nonrealism to study because it consists almost entirely of variations on a theme. The majority of nonrealistic plays, on the other hand, tend to combine theme and variations with at least the minimal features of a standard plot and characters. *Fefu and Her Friends* combines both forms in almost equal measure. *Top Girls* begins with a theme-and-variations scene (a contemporary dinner party with historical and imaginary characters), followed by a comparatively standard plot with characters from both standard and nonrealistic modes. *Machinal*, *Mother Courage*, *The Birthday Party*, *Angels in America*, and *A Lie of the Mind* are essentially standard plots broken up by episodes of theme and variations. Consequently, while plot and character may be slight in nonrealistic plays, the intellectual patterns found in them are crucial to their meaning. More than a manipulative experience intended to confuse, nonrealistic plays are composed of premeditated thematic variations, fully and clearly expressed, designed to place the plays within particular visions of the world. In practical terms, nonrealistic plays are ideas in which the meaning is physicalized, externalized, and objectified. And in doing so, a constant alternation is established between everyday reality and large collective generalizations, like keeping two balls in the air at the same time.

It is also worth keeping in mind that nonrealistic plays are generally engaged in satiric social criticism of one kind or another. Today more than ever ours is a culture of ideas. Public discourse is filled with theories and explanations about everything, and we are brought up to know them all; or more accurately, to half-know them, a situation that itself has become the source of much satire.

Sophie Treadwell, author of *Machinal*, was a sharp social critic when she pointed a satirical finger at Mr. Jones, whose money-oriented way of life created a society of androids. In *Machinal* the entire era of extreme capitalism is represented, with its impressive efficiency and single-minded concentration on profit-making at the expense of human relations. Brecht did more with this theme than Treadwell did, and the commercialization of politics and economics were natural subjects for his assaults on unprincipled capitalism. And when Tony Kushner portrays representatives of political liberalism and conservatism in *Angels in America*, he is not so much inventing his own drama of ideas as making fun of the characters'

personal dramas of ideas, which is an act they unknowingly put on before the world.

A final point worth remembering is that in a practical sense all plays—realistic, nonrealistic, and any combination thereof—are studies of life. Realism tends to examine life from the outside openly and frankly. Conversely, nonrealism tends to explore life from the inside to grasp the concentrated essence of the meaning, and from this essential interior create a sharply mythic theatrical form. The task for actors, directors, and designers is to discover and theatricalize the coherence that lies beneath the bewildering arrangement of associations, contrasts, and counterpoints.

Summary

Idea refers to the thoughts and thought patterns expressed in the play. The **verbal devices for communicating the main idea** include titles, discussions, sayings, allusions, set speeches, imagery, and symbolism. **Titles** are likely to convey the main idea or associations with it. **Discussions** are sustained conversations about specific ideas. **Sayings** are brief, quotable statements that compress human experience into a concise verbal generality. **Allusions** are references to persons, places, or things outside the play. **Set speeches** are formal or methodical speeches that emphasize specific intellectual issues. **Imagery** refers to the use of sensory language in reference to objects, actions, or ideas. A **symbol** is something that represents or stands for something else. A **prologue** (the speech before) is a small scene, formally separate from the play, in which the main idea is subtly introduced. An **epilogue** (the speech after) summarizes the main idea by restating it at the end of the play within a broader context. A **narrator** is a character that adds spoken commentary to the action. A **chorus** is a group of characters that serve as participants, commentators, or supplements to the main action. A **raisonneur** (reasoner) is a character who voices aspects of the main idea so as to influence or impress other characters through reasoning. A **confidant(e)** is a close friend or associate with whom the main character shares secrets or discusses personal problems. The term **norm (normative) character** is someone who is prudently adjusted to the fictional reality of the play. **Parallelism** matches characters with other characters to reinforce connecting issues through repetition and/or contrast. **Internal (intellectual) conflicts** are those arising from abstract ideas such as nature, social conventions, destiny, history, etc. The **main climax** is the most important event (turning point) in the plot.

Exercises for a Scene or Short Play

1. **Idea in the Words.** Does the title reflect the meaning? If so, does it do so directly, indirectly, poetically, ironically? Look for discussions about particular ideas, who speaks them, and what ideas are highlighted. Look for sayings, who utters them, and what ideas they illustrate. Look for literary, religious, or cultural allusions, who speaks them, and what ideas they put across. Look for set speeches formally putting forward specific ideas, who speaks them, and what ideas they convey. Look for images and intentional symbols in the dialogue and the ideas they suggest. Is there a prologue or an epilogue? If so, how do they highlight the main idea? Suggest features of the physical production that would point up or counterpoint these indications of the main idea in the words.
2. **Idea in the characters.** Is there a narrator or chorus? If so, when and how do they express the main idea? Is there a character who offers frank advice or tries to reason with others (*raisonneur*)? If so, how do that character's words relate to the main idea? Is there someone in whom the leading character confides private feelings (*confidant[e]*)? If so, how do that character's words relate to the main idea? In a comedy, is there a character that has adjusted to the social conventions of the play's fictional reality (*norm character*)? If so, how do that character's words and actions relate to the main idea? Suggest features of the physical production that would point up or counterpoint these indications of the main idea in the characters.
3. **Idea in the plot.** Look for characters or situations that repeat or highlight similarities with others (*parallelisms* or *foils*). If so, how do they relate to the main idea? Look for internal conflicts involving nature, social conventions, destiny, or history. Can any intentional symbols be found in the dialogue or action? If so, how do they relate to the main idea? How does the main climax embody the main idea? Suggest features of the physical production that would point up or counterpoint these indications of idea in the plot.
4. **Statement of the main idea.** Formulate the main idea in the form of an action summary, super-objective, thesis sentence, or theme. Explain your rationale for selecting a particular verbal form. Justify the main idea with specific information from the play itself. Suggest features of the physical production that would point up or counterpoint the main idea.

5. **Following Action Analysis.** As a test of artistic awareness, identify the play's seed and theme according to the explanation found in Chapter 1, "Action Analysis."

Afterword on Action Analysis

This chapter finishes study of the formalist origins of Action Analysis (Chapter 1), for which the investigative underpinnings should be evident at this point. The chains of situations, external events, internal events, and three major climaxes are reduced treatments of external and internal action in the dialogue (Chapter 4) and progressions and structure (Chapter 5). Reviewing the facts is a reduced treatment of given circumstances (Chapter 2) and background story (Chapter 3). Through-action and counter through-action in Action Analysis are reduced treatments of character (Chapter 6). And seed, theme, super-objective, and through-action are reduced treatments of idea (Chapter 7).

The following chapters continue to teach script analysis using formalist methodology. However, they deal with more complex issues than Action Analysis can address by itself. Because Action Analysis depends by definition on the study of action, it can provide few practical insights about dialogue (Chapter 8), tempo, rhythm, and mood (Chapter 9), or style (Chapter 10). Formalist Analysis is better equipped to sort out advanced features such as these.

Dialogue

Conversational Exchange Between Two or More Characters

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Dialogue is the spoken conversation in a play. It includes all the written talk, monologues, soliloquies, narration, choral odes, songs, and anything else spoken by the characters. It does not include stage directions. Enough has already been shown in earlier chapters to explain the importance of studying stage dialogue for information about given circumstances, background story, plot, character, and idea. Yet even when stage dialogue is clear about all this information, it requires further study for its own sake, because in addition to its function as the play's primary means of verbal communication, dialogue is also the playwright's sole means of expression. Dialogue must at least be efficiently competent, but it can also display a high degree of literary virtuosity.

Although many readers devote scant attention to the language of stage dialogue, words as such do indeed exert a subtle but significant influence. The choice of words may evoke comments such as "The dialogue is easy to understand." "The words come from the characters naturally." "The play uses lots of short sentences." "I was so bored by the long and complicated sentences that I skipped whole passages." Yet script analysis needs to provide more than these generalized opinions to offer something helpful in the rehearsal hall or design studio.

Diction refers to the technical and artistic qualities of language, specifically the selection and arrangement of words, phrases, sentences, lines, and speeches. This chapter treats dialogue as diction, starting with the basic building blocks and proceeding to more artistic qualities. Some features are relative, and opinions about them vary, but

most dialogue can be studied in the same open-minded way already recommended in this book.

Frequently the analysis of dialogue uncovers a hidden obstacle. To understand the language in a play, readers first need to understand the basics of grammar (the whole system and structure of a language), syntax (the arrangement of words and phrases to create well-formed sentences in a language), punctuation (marks used in writing to separate sentences and their elements and to clarify meaning), sentences (a set of words that is complete in itself, typically containing a subject and verb), paragraphs (distinct sections of a piece of writing, usually dealing with a single theme and indicated by a new line, indentation, or numbering), and so forth. Therefore, before starting to work, for some readers, it might be necessary to review these fundamentals. Although the rules of language usage can occasionally be subtle and complex, their subtlety and complexity appear in the way writers stretch the basic rules. Readers should know what those rules are, how and why they are being stretched, and for what effect. Fortunately, the subject is not that difficult. Any serious learner can cover the basics with a good manual. Highly recommended are: *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White (2000) and its companion work, *The Elements of Grammar* by Margaret Shertzer (2001).

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This chapter would be negligent if it didn't at least mention Stanislavsky's extraordinary chapter "Voice and Speech" in Part Two of *An Actor's Work* (2008). Even today, this chapter contains some of the most comprehensive and accessible teaching discoverable about voice and speech for the stage.

Subtext—An Aside

Subtext is a hidden meaning that is different from the direct meaning of the words, which, when spoken, are adjusted depending on the context of the situation. Stanislavsky equates *subtext* with the internal life of a character that runs continuously beneath the dialogue, continually justifying and energizing it. In performance, the subtext is revealed by the actors through intonations, pauses, facial expressions, gestures, and timing.

A contemporary playwright whose plays often languish from inattention to subtext in performance is Sam Shepard. The subtext of *A Lie of the Mind*, for example, is frequently under-expressed in production, leaving audiences and actors in a muddle. A clear and steady look at what happens in the play can solve such problems. *A Lie of the Mind* is about an abusive husband who only learns what love

means after he almost kills his wife. The subtext throughout the play is plugged into the transforming power of love. Without this subtext (the undercurrent of love lost, distorted, diverted, and misguided), the play's dramatic potential becomes dissipated, and the play itself falls off to become little more than a confusing narrative.

Historical plays tend to place more emphasis on the words of a play than modern plays do; nevertheless, subtext plays a large part in their understanding as well, notably where irony or satire are called for. Stanislavsky provides an instructive example from a rehearsal study of *Tartuffe*. In the following passage, there is little apparent external action, but the episode is comical because of its subtext. Ever since the arrival of Tartuffe, Dorine has been trying to persuade Cleante that Orgon has taken leave of his senses. So, when Orgon returns from his visit to the country, Dorine uses the opportunity to prove the truth of her assertion to Cleante. Her objective here is "to incite Orgon to reveal his mad obsession with Tartuffe." Orgon has been away from home and is worried about how Tartuffe has been treated in the interim. His objective is "to safeguard the welfare of Tartuffe," and of course he interprets every incident as an injury to Tartuffe. Stanislavsky's subtext is paraphrased in brackets (q.v. Toporkov, 2004: 126–130).

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ORGON. [How is Tartuffe?] Has everything gone well the few days I've been away? What have you been doing? How is everyone?

DORINE. [Now I'll expose your real feelings.] The day before yesterday the mistress was feverish all day. She had a dreadful headache.

ORGON. [All that commotion right next to Tartuffe's bedroom—they were keeping him from praying!] And Tartuffe?

DORINE. [I knew it!] Tartuffe? He's very well: hale and hearty; in the pink.

ORGON. [How hard it must have been for him to look as if he was untroubled!] Poor fellow!

DORINE. [He's hooked! Now I'll draw him out.] In the evening she felt faint and couldn't touch anything, her headache was so bad.

ORGON. [They were only so worried about Elmire that they completely forgot about Tartuffe!] And Tartuffe?

DORINE. [Now he's really upset! I'll lay it on thick.] He supped with her. She ate

nothing, but he very devoutly devoured a couple of partridges and half a hashed leg of mutton.

ORGON. [They pushed food at him even though he was fasting!] Poor fellow!

DORINE. [What a fool you are!] She never closed her eyes all through the night. She was too feverish to sleep, and we had to sit up with her until morning.

ORGON. [They kept him from praying all night!] And Tartuffe?

DORINE. [You still don't get it.] Feeling pleasantly drowsy, he went straight to his room, jumped into a nice warm bed, and slept like a top until morning.

ORGON. [He must have collapsed from the stress!] Poor fellow!

DORINE. [This should really do the trick!] Eventually she yielded to our persuasions, allowed herself to be bled, and soon felt much relieved.

ORGON. [OMG! Did he give his own blood too?!] And Tartuffe?

DORINE. [I'll show you what "sacrifices" he made.] He dutifully kept up his spirits and took three or four good swigs of wine at breakfast to fortify himself against the worst that might happen and to make up for the blood the mistress had lost.

ORGON. [But he doesn't drink! He loves us so much that he damaged his own health!] Poor fellow!

This episode entails some external action as Orgon arrives, takes off his coat, sets down his traveling bag, etc. He might also pursue Dorine around the room with his questions. Nonetheless, this external action would not generate much interest in itself without the subtext of Orgon's obsessive attention to Tartuffe's welfare and Dorine's determination to expose this very obsession. The humor emerges from the subtext. In a recent production at the Moscow Art Theatre, Orgon clasped a bust of Tartuffe in his arms during this episode.

The subtext can usually be found by carefully studying the text itself. In some cases, this is not very difficult. It is not difficult

to recognize, for example, that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are deceiving Hamlet when they talk about their friendship with him. After all, they have entirely revealed themselves in a previous scene when Claudius instructs them to work undercover against Hamlet. It is much more challenging to discover the subtext of Chekhov's dialogue or a role like Hamlet, which is full of internal zigzags and his thinking is purposely mysterious to others. Sometimes the subtext of a particular character only becomes clear at the very end of the play when an unexpected event clarifies everything that happened before. Thus, in Ibsen's play, *The Wild Duck*, it is only in the final episode that Gregers Werle's self-centered idealism is revealed, which has been concealed throughout the entire play.

Words

There may be many characters in a play, and they may speak in many different ways, but in the best work, each character preserves a specific manner of speech identified as that character's alone. Since characters talk in their own voices, it is logical that the words they use tell us a great deal about them. Characters can be understood to some extent by the very words they choose.

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Abstract and Concrete

One of the first features to search for in words is their quality of abstraction or concreteness. **Abstract words describe things that cannot be perceived by the senses**, such as love, honor, experience, heritage, democracy, materialism, etc. Creon in *Oedipus Rex* and Cleante in *Tartuffe* use abstract words such as power, knowledge, justice, hypocrisy, and self-sacrifice. Characters who use such words tend to be reserved, aloof, or even affected. **Concrete words describe things that can be seen and touched, such as dog, flower, tree, thumbtack, pencil, computer, chair, book, etc.** They are vivid and emphatic, and the characters who use them tend to display comparable traits. Oedipus and Orgon speak in concrete terms like this. They express their hasty judgments and rash decrees using robust and concrete language that differs from Creon and Cleante's cautious abstractions.

Formal and Informal

Another quality is the formality or informality of the words themselves. **Formal words denote the kind of elevated language typically**

found in scholarly and literary writing, “bigger” words that are not generally used in daily conversation: compensate, ascend, interrogate, establish, penultimate, elegantly, dichotomy, etc. Formal language aims at precision, and it needs to restrict emotion to do so. Informal words are simple everyday words, shorter words of the kind we generally use in ordinary conversation: okay, stuff, set up, ask, thing, and contractions such as won’t instead of will not, shouldn’t instead of should not, etc.—words that are simpler and more direct.

Comparing the words of Joseph Surface with those of his brother Charles in *The School for Scandal*, we can see an illustration of these different word types. Joseph’s frequent use of “indeed,” “certainly,” “however,” and similarly formal words may tell us that he is class-conscious and affected and that he values literary style over emotional sincerity. By contrast, his brother Charles’s use of words such as “bumper,” “blockhead,” “wench,” and similar kinds of everyday words arises from his typically fair-minded point of view. He does not worry about how he sounds to others as Joseph does. The down-to-earth characters in *A Lie of the Mind* and *American Buffalo* generally use informal words to express themselves as well.

Related to formal and informal vocabulary is the syllabic composition of words. Polysyllabic words are longer and often derive from Latin, historically the language of scholars. Joseph Asagai is the Nigerian exchange student who is Beneatha Younger’s boyfriend in *A Raisin in the Sun*. He enjoys displaying his new American education with polysyllabic words: “mutilated,” “accommodate,” “assimilate.” In *Angels in America*, Louis Ironson’s speech-making—“comparatively,” “inexorably,” “ontologically”—contrasts with Roy Cohn’s unaffected working-class language: “So, baby doll, what?” “Shove it.” “Bleah.” The uneducated characters in Brecht’s *Mother Courage* often speak in single-syllable words (in translation): “Halt, you scum!” “He’s pulled a black cross. He’s through.” “You’ve left your hat.” Formal, polysyllabic words tend to be associated with emotional restraint, while short, informal words carry a feeling of emotional freedom.

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Jargon and Slang

Jargon is specialized professional language. Slang is nonstandard everyday words. These language forms have particular appeal in dramatic dialogue because they are unusual, and therefore vivid and intriguing. Our recognition of such language as exciting is just as important as the plausibility it lends to the dialogue. *Mother Courage* and *American*

Buffalo acquire some of their entertainment value from the use of professional jargon from military life and petty crime, and from everyday slang. They employ “good-bad” speech, meaning bad speech that is written to achieve good, expressive effects. The obscenities in *Angels in America* are unsettling, of course, but they also keep the political ideas of the play operating on a basic human level. Characters in *Machinal* speak the jargon of the commercial world and the big city. African-American slang is found in *A Raisin in the Sun*: “bread” for money and “ofay” for white person (both words excluded from the movie version), and *The Piano Lesson*: “country farm” for prison and “studying” for “concerned with.” In *The Birthday Party*, the characters speak a variety of British slang: “bloke” for man, “bird” for woman. Communication is enriched by jargon and slang from these social groups and from many more besides. On stage, jargon and slang entertain as much as they help to identify characters within a particular social context.

Connotation

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Recall from the Introduction that “connote” means to suggest or convey associations over and above the plain (denoted) dictionary meaning. **Connotative words are words that convey more than their dictionary meaning.** For example, the words “gentleman” and “lady” mean more than the words “man” and “woman,” “snake” means more than “serpent,” and “gossip” means more than “talk.” Our collective social experience attaches extra meaning to these words. In *Happy Days*, “Brownie” means more than “revolver” and “emmet” means more than “ant.” Dramatists use such connotative words because they add meaning without necessarily adding more words.

Some words are almost solely connotative, with little or no dictionary meaning at all. Linguists describe them as snarl and purr words. They may look like ordinary words, but their literal meanings are of negligible importance. Words like “damn” or “ouch” or “wow” are little more than snarls that express pure feelings. Similarly, “wow” or “oooh” or “aaah” express little more than pleasure. Since emotion plays such a large part in dramatic dialogue, play readers should be alert for the connotative as well as the literal meanings of words.

Sentences

The next type of language device of interest here is that of the sentence, meaning a set of words complete in itself. Sentences are the primary verbal device of a play. Studying the various features of a

play's sentences can reveal dramatic potentials that are sometimes overlooked by readers.

Length

Sentence length refers to the number of words in a sentence. Short sentences (1–3 words) tend to convey speed, impatience, anger, and urgency. Medium sentences (3–12 words) tend to communicate basic ideas and details, the core of most dramatic writing. Long sentences (12+ words) tend to express slowness, calmness, and thoughtfulness.

The potential usefulness of sentence length for character analysis is shown in the episode between Polonius and Reynaldo (1,2) of *Hamlet*, in which Polonius instructs Reynaldo to keep an eye on Laertes while he is in France. In this brief exchange, Polonius says seven times as many words as Reynaldo, his sentences are over four times more extended, and he uses various abstract words. Reynaldo speaks in short sentences; he is a simple and down-to-earth person who is trying to bring an end to Polonius's pontificating.

American Buffalo offers some playable dramatic values regarding sentence length as well. Don and Bob appear together in the first episode of Act 1. The average sentence length is nine words, and most sentences there are even shorter. True, in modern plays, most characters tend to say what must be told using the fewest words possible. However, these sentences are much shorter than we might expect even in a contemporary play, and many of the lines are also fragments. This might show a lack of education or strong feelings. Together with the street jargon, offensive slang, and connotative words, the short length of the sentences in *American Buffalo* contributes to the charged emotional atmosphere that is characteristic of Mamet's dialogue.

In performance, long sentences may be governed by a halting, insecure feeling of anxiety or perhaps by unrestrained hysterics. They may also be dictated by the complexity of the thinking or the richness of the images, as in the case of Shakespeare. Short sentences and sentence fragments can be harsh and piercing or alternatively suggest weariness or dullness. From careful study of the given circumstances, readers should be able to recognize both extremes and the variations in between.

Type

Sentences can be grammatically simple (one main clause), compound (two or more main clauses connected by a conjunction), or complex (two or more clauses, but one is subordinate and

linked with a subordinating word). Dialogue in classic plays shows noticeable patterns, flows clearly from one point to another, and is accentuated by prominent stops. Typically, there is enough descriptive matter in a classic or historical sentence to constitute several sentences in a modern play. By contrast, nearly all sentences in modern plays sound like ordinary speech and do not call attention to themselves as the carefully crafted language objects they really are. Sentences tend to be short and stop when the primary sense is complete. The lesson called for here is that sentence types can and should be studied, and that this study has potential dramatic value.

To illustrate this value, we will study passages from three plays: one classic, one early modern realistic, and one late modern realistic. The first passage is from *The School for Scandal*. Rowley is persuading Sir Peter Teazle that he is mistaken in his opinions of Charles and Joseph Surface.

ROWLEY. You know, Sir Peter, I have always taken the liberty to differ with you on the subject of these two young gentlemen. I only wish you may not be deceived in your opinion of the elder. For Charles, my life on't! he will retrieve his errors yet. Their worthy father, once my honored master, was, at his years, nearly as wild a spark; yet when he died, he did not leave a more benevolent heart to lament his loss.

SIR PETER. You are wrong, Master Rowley. On their father's death, you know, I acted as a kind of guardian to them both till their uncle Sir Oliver's liberality gave them an early independence. Of course no person could have more opportunity of judging their hearts, and I was never mistaken in my life. Joseph is indeed a model for the young men of the age. He is a man of sentiment and acts up to the sentiments he professes; but, for the other, take my word for't, if he had any grain of virtue by descent, he has dissipated it with the rest of his inheritance. Ah! my old friend Sir Oliver will be deeply mortified when he finds how part of his bounty has been misapplied.

The early modern realistic example next involves a similar situation in *The Wild Duck*. Dr. Relling is attempting to refute Gregers Werle's opinion of the integrity of Hjalmar Ekdal.

GREGERS. What is your explanation of the spiritual tumult that is now going on inside Hjalmar Ekdal?

RELLING. A lot of spiritual tumult I've noticed in him.

GREGERS. What! Not at such a crisis, when his whole life has been placed on a new foundation? How can you think that such an individuality as Hjalmar's—

RELLING. Oh, individuality—him! If he ever had any tendency to the abnormal developments you call individuality, I can assure you it was rooted out of him while he was still in his teens.

GREGERS. That would be strange indeed—considering the loving care with which he was brought up.

RELLING. By those two high-flown, hysterical maiden aunts, you mean?

GREGERS. Let me tell you that they were women who never forgot the claim of the ideal—but of course you will only jeer at me again.

RELLING. No, I'm in no humor for that. I know all about those ladies, for he has ladled out no end of rhetoric on the subject of his "two soul mothers." But I don't think he has much to thank them for. Ekdal's misfortune is that in his own circle he has always been looked upon as a shining light.

GREGERS. Not without reason, surely. Look at the depth of his mind!

RELLING. I have never discovered it. That his father believed in it I don't so much wonder; the old lieutenant has been an ass all his days.

The passage from *The School for Scandal* features abstract words ("liberty," "honored," "benevolent," "mortified," etc.) and various sentence types (simple, compound, complex, and so on). The sentences are somewhat long and contain an assortment of twists and turns (dependent and independent clauses). The tempo of the dialogue as written is slow and measured. In the passage from *The Wild Duck*, there are fewer sentence types and fewer twists and turns. The dialogue in the second passage also contains (in translation) broken sentences, missing links, and nonstandard grammar. The characters speak rapidly, and the stresses are crowded together unevenly ("Oh, individuality—him!"). The sentence types in the first passage show Rowley and Sir Peter disagreeing in a reasonable and polite manner. The sentences in the second passage show Gregers and Dr. Relling disagreeing with more emotion. Also, notice that in both passages the critical information generally comes at the end of a sentence. (Of course, here we are comparing an English-language play with a Norwegian play translated into English, but the practical consequences still apply. Most foreign-language plays in English-speaking countries are read and performed in English.)

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The third passage is from the late modern play, *American Buffalo*, where Don teaches Bob a lesson about a character named Fletcher, whom Don respects for his so-called professionalism. Watch for the radical change in sentence length, word choice, and sentence types in *this play* compared to those same features in *The School for Scandal* and *The Wild Duck*.

DON. Now lookit Fletcher.

BOB. Fletch?

DON. Now, Fletcher is a standup guy.

BOB. Yeah.

DON. You take him and put him down in some strange town with just a nickel in his pocket, and by nightfall he'll have that town by the balls. This is not talk, Bob, this is action.

(Pause.)

BOB. He's a real good card player.

DON. You're fucking A he is, Bob, and this is what I'm getting at. Skill. Skill and talent and the balls to arrive at your own *conclusions*. The fucker won a hundred bucks last night.

BOB. Yeah?
DON. Oh yeah.
BOB. And who was playing?
DON. Me ...

There are five simple sentences and six compound sentences (two independent clauses connected by the word "and"), broken sentences ("Me . . ."), sentence fragments ("Skill. Skill and talent and the balls to arrive at your own *conclusions*."), and only a few formal links between lines (see Linking below). Readers familiar with Mamet's plays will understand this example is generally representative of his dialogue. It takes only a little careful reading to see how sentence types are closely associated with character and situation.

Rhythm

Sentence rhythm refers to patterns of verbal thought. Although there is no consistent method for identifying the rhythm of written prose, it is undeniable that sentence rhythm carries emotional effects. Sentence rhythm may be psychological, subjective, and perhaps uncontrollable, but when internal organization is considered as a contributing factor, a way is open for understanding what sentence rhythm is and how it works. Scanning sentences for rhythm in the manner of poetry, however, may not be a worthwhile exercise if it is practiced for very long. The rhythm of sentences must be orally expressed through performance to be appreciated. Hence, it is better to get into the habit of reading aloud. Oral reading allows for hearing the difference between musical and clashing sentence rhythms, and between agreeable and awkward sound combinations.

Let's scan the rhythm of this famous prose passage from *Hamlet*, which has been scanned informally here for thought patterns. For reasons explained further ahead, the punctuation is from the First-Folio edition of the play.

HAMLET. Speak the speech I pray you, as I
pronounced it to you trippingly on the
tongue:// But if you mouth it, as many of
your Players do, I had as lief the town
crier had spoke my lines: // Nor do not
saw the air too much your hand thus, but
use all gently; // for in the very torrent,
tempest, and (as I may say) the whirlwind

of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. // Oh it offends me to the soul, to see a robustious periwig-pated fellow, tear a passion to tatters, to wry rags, to split the ears of the groundlings: // who (for the most part) are capable of nothing, but inexplicable dumb-shows, & noise: // I could have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant: // it out-Herods Herod. // Pray you avoid it. [146 words, 9 thought pulses]

And for further comparison, here is a speech from *Death of a Salesman*:

BIFF. I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. // You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed to the ash can // like all the rest of them! // I'm one dollar an hour, Willy! // I tried seven states and couldn't raise it. // A buck an hour. // Do you gather my meaning! // I'm not bringing home any prizes anymore, and you're going to stop waiting for me to bring them home! [81 words, 8 thought pulses]

And a speech from *A Lie of the Mind*:

JAKE. (Staring.) There's this thing // this thing in my head. // This thing that the next moment // the moment right after this one will blow up. // Explode with a voice. // A scream from a voice I don't know. // Or a voice I knew once but now it's changed. // It doesn't know me either. // Now. // It used to but not now. // I've scared it into something else. // Another form. // A whole other person who doesn't see me anymore. [88 words, 14 thought pulses]

There are other ways to scan these passages, but in any case, this shows how certain thoughts are collected in thought patterns (primarily full

sentences) and how this helps to create rhythmic pulsations in the dialogue. The language in *Hamlet* has comparatively fewer thought pulses even though it has approximately 40 percent more words than the other two passages. The passages from *Death of a Salesman* and *A Lie of the Mind* have approximately the same number of words (eighty-one vs. eighty-eight), but Shepard's play has approximately 40 percent more thought pulses than the passages from Miller's play. The sentences in all three passages require an understanding of and feeling for spoken rhythm to express their intellectual and emotional potential from end to end.

Speeches

A line is a single continuous statement by a specific character, typically a few sentences or less. A speech is an extended sequence of sentences devoted to one particular issue. Since characters talk at greater length about things that are particularly meaningful for them, speeches are sure signs that important issues are at stake. A representative instance occurs in 1,4 of *Tartuffe*, when Cleante speaks long-windedly to Orgon about the difference between hypocrisy and genuine devoutness; also, when Satine expresses his "All for man!" sentiments at the end of *The Lower Depths*. Despite appearances, speeches are not merely lengthy expressions of ideas or feeling. Instead, they are carefully orchestrated to express the problems that are in some way associated with the play's main idea.

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Punctuation

Periods, commas, exclamation points, question marks, ellipses, and single and double dashes have specific grammatical meanings. However, as director and Shakespeare scholar B. Iden Payne taught, punctuation in stage dialogue is not only grammatical but also "dramatical." By this, he meant that **playwrights employ punctuation not only for reasons of good grammar but also to signal meaning and expression**. The vocal drop that accompanies a *period* shows the end of a thought or feeling. The vocal rise of a *question mark* requires a reply. *Commas* and *semicolons* are warnings that call for pauses of certain lengths. A *colon* demands attention to what follows it. An *exclamation point* signals forceful approval or disagreement. *Dashes* indicate an interrupted thought. *Ellipses* hint at something left unsaid (see *An Actor's Work*, 414ff.). Look at the differences, for example, between the punctuation in Shakespeare's original folios (1623, see *Hamlet's*

speech above), which were written for actors, and the standard Globe Edition (1864), with the original punctuation "corrected" by literary scholars. Most stage versions of modern plays obtainable from professional publishing houses contain the playwrights' original "dramatical" punctuation.

The following passage from *A Raisin in the Sun* illustrates the expressive use of punctuation. Recall that Walter Younger is angry about his friend Willy's theft of the \$10,000 in insurance money that he (Walter) was planning to use to buy a liquor store. To replace the money, Walter has agreed to accept Karl Lindner's payoff to keep his family from moving to an all-white neighborhood as they had planned. Obviously, this payoff is humiliating for both Walter and his family.

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WALTER. What's the matter with you all! I didn't make this world! It was given to me this way! Hell, yes, I want me some yachts someday! Yes, I want to hang some real pearls 'round my wife's neck. Ain't she supposed to wear pearls? Somebody tell me—, who decides which women is suppose to wear pearls in this world. I tell you I am a man—and I think my wife should wear pearls in this world!

MAMA. Baby, how you going to feel on the inside?

WALTER. Fine! ... Going to feel fine ... a man ...

MAMA. You won't have nothing left then, Walter Lee.

WALTER. I'm going to feel fine, Mama. I'm going to look that son-of-a-bitch in the eyes and say — and say, "All right, Mr. Lindner — that's your neighborhood out there. You got the right to keep it like you want. You got the right to have it like you want. Just write the check and—the house is yours." And, and I am going to say — And you — you people just put the money in my hand and you won't have to live next to this bunch of stinking niggers! ... Maybe—maybe I'll just get down on my black knees ... Captain, Mistuh, Bossman. A-hee-hee-hee! Yassssuh! Great White Father, just gi'

ussen de money, fo' God's sake, and we's
ain't gwine come out deh and dirty up yo'
white folks neighborhood ...

Hansberry has used exclamation points, commas, ellipses, and dashes in "dramatical" fashion. The exclamation marks in the first line show his anger. At the word "man," significantly, he begins to hesitate, and his speech becomes halting and troubled. He falters several times during the last sentences as the depth of his disgrace settles into his consciousness. His voice breaks, he stumbles, falls to his knees, and breaks down. The ellipsis shows that the speech ends with an embarrassing silence. The punctuation is dramatical as much as grammatical, and more than a sign of slang and nonstandard speech. Compare it with the prose-poetry of August Wilson's dialogue in *The Piano Lesson*, for example, which also contains slang and nonstandard speech, but has very few dashes or ellipses even though it includes many more long speeches.

Linking

We know from composition courses that linking in prose is performed by antecedents and tenses, phrases and clauses, and other forms of backward and forward reference to knit sentences together. When there is no linking, or when it is weakly done, meaning stumbles. **Linking refers to the thoughts and stage business that serve to connect lines of dialogue between and among the characters.** Linking helps to maintain the feeling of forward motion in the plot and provides the basis for line-to-line communication among the characters, called give-and-take, reciprocation, or communion.

Ordinarily, the practice of linking involves one complete idea to one line of dialogue, with the last thought of one line suggesting the first thought of the next. This is not a rigid rule, but whenever something breaks the connection, it will most likely have a purpose of its own. The following passage shows traditional linking at work in *The School for Scandal*. Here Snake has just reported to Lady Sneerwell that he placed scandalous reports about Charles Surface in the newspapers. Lady Sneerwell and Charles were once lovers, and she wants to win Charles back from his current lover by damaging his reputation. Charles' brother, Joseph Surface, joins the scene. Careful reading will show how the final thoughts in each line suggest the initial thoughts in the following sequence.

JOSEPH SURFACE. My dear Lady Sneerwell, how do you do today? Mr. Snake, your most obedient.

LADY SNEERWELL. Snake has just been teasing me on our mutual attachment; but I have informed him of our real views. You know how useful he has been to us; and believe me, the confidence is not ill placed.

JOSEPH SURFACE. Madam, it is impossible for me to suspect a man of Mr. Snake's sensibility and discernment.

LADY SNEERWELL. Well, well, no compliments now; but tell me when you saw your mistress, Maria—or, what is more material to me, your brother.

JOSEPH SURFACE. I have not seen either since I left you; but I can inform you that they never meet. Some of your stories have taken good effect on Maria.

LADY SNEERWELL. Ah, my dear Snake! The merit of this belongs to you. But do your brother's distresses increase?

JOSEPH SURFACE. Every hour. I am told he has had another summons from the court yesterday. In short, his dissipation and extravagance exceed anything I have ever heard of.

LADY SNEERWELL. Poor Charles!

JOSEPH SURFACE. True, madam; notwithstanding his vices one can't help feeling for him. Poor Charles! I'm sure I wish it were in my power to be of any essential service to him; for the man who does not share in the distresses of a brother, even though merited by his own misconduct, serves —

LADY SNEERWELL. O Lud! You are going to be moral and forget that you are among friends.

JOSEPH SURFACE. Egad, that's true! I'll keep that sentiment till I see Sir Peter. However, it is certainly a charity to rescue Maria from such a libertine, who, if he is to be reclaimed, can be so only by a person of your ladyship's superior accomplishments and understanding.

SNAKE. I believe, Lady Sneerwell, here's company coming. I'll go and copy the letter I mentioned to you. Mr. Surface, your most obedient.

JOSEPH SURFACE. Sir, you're very devoted.

Each line connects with the line before and the line after, and the conversation moves from one topic to the next without any breaks in logic or feeling. The two lines without verbal links are linked nonverbally. Lady Sneerwell's expression ("Poor Charles!") seems to end her line before furnishing a connection with Joseph Surface's next line. Actually, the two lines are actually linked by the unspoken thought of Lady Sneerwell's secret love for Charles. The dramatist expects the actors to notice this and provide a facial expression, gesture, or stage business to fill the pause. At first glance, Snake's line announcing the arrival of visitors also seems unlinked; however, the offstage sounds of the approaching guests provide the link here.

We have shown that linking is not always so openly expressed in the dialogue. This is particularly true in modern plays, where psycho-physical expression is often more important than verbal expression; that is, where subtext is as important as or more important than spoken text. Much of the dialogue in *A Lie of the Mind*, *Angels in America*, *American Buffalo*, and *The Birthday Party*, for example, seems to skip from one line to another in unlinked fashion, almost telegraphic in its brevity. In performance, where the subtext becomes energized, the effect is less broken and more lifelike, as well as more emotionally provocative.

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Literariness

Literariness is the use of artistic devices such as rhythmic structure, rhyme, and other patterns of sound and repetition. From the preceding discussions, it should be clear that professional understanding of dialogue involves scrupulous attention to "dramatical" use of words, sentences, and speeches, as well as their internal and external arrangement. Our awareness increases if we can also recognize when dialogue has literary qualities of its own. Dialogue that merely asserts the facts of plot, character, and idea may be no more than efficient and satisfying. Yet many dramatists care for language very much as language in itself, and for this reason they are artists in words as well as action and character.

To understand how dialogue can have in-built literary merit, consider the following questions. Does the dialogue merely reveal the basic facts in a practical way, or does it also display entertainment value of its own? Does it contain interesting speech? Is it explicitly poetic? English-language study plays whose dialogue has unique literary qualities of its own include *Hamlet*, *The School for Scandal*, *Machinal*, *Happy Days*, and *American Buffalo*. Not every play or play analysis needs to deal with these topics extensively, but most plays require at least minimal understanding of the potential merit of the dialogue as literature.

Imagery

Imagery refers to mental pictures created through association with the various senses. For example, sight: as bright as the sun; hearing: the pop of a cork; taste: the bitterness of defeat; smell: a breath of fresh air; touch: the iron grip of destiny. Imagery may be direct and literal: a slice of the sky; or figurative, using similes, which are comparisons using like or as: float like a butterfly, sting like a bee; and metaphors, which are comparisons between two unlike things that actually have something in common: love is a rose; and symbols, things that represent or stand for something else: dove = peace. Although a playwright may use more or less imagery in a play, awareness of imagery becomes especially important when a playwright makes frequent use of poetic or noticeably expressive language. Imagery analysis has potential intellectual value, but it is particularly useful for designers, whose task is to convert such images into elements of physical production.

A case in point is Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, in which the dialogue can sometimes be seen as purely realistic, and thus not adequately appreciated for its poetic or figurative qualities. This makes the play a useful learning device for the study of imagery. *Three Sisters* contains quite a few image groups, of which the following is only a sampling from Act 1:

Locale: 40 (Moscow [17], home, high school, Petersburg, military school, university, Basmanny Street, Nemetzky Street, Red Barracks, train station, Novodevichy Cemetery, town, apartment)

Family: 37 (father [13], mother, brother, mother-in-law, daughters, sisters, grandfather, wife, husband)

Time: 32 (1 year ago, May 5th, 11 years ago, yesterday, morning, evening, 4 years duration, dawn, noon, 7:00am, 9:00am, 25-30 years ahead, 2-3 years older, saint's day, all night, 4:00am, summer, 50 years ahead, Sunday, 7 minutes fast, 20 years old, 30 years old)

Nature: 24 (cold, snow, rain, warm, blooming, sunshine, weather, sky, hot, storm, oak tree, river, birch trees, woods, flowers)

Occupation: 14 (brigadier general, professor, battery commander, workman, shepherd, teacher, engineer, officer, lieutenant colonel, scholar, school principal)

Colors: 6 (white, gold)

Metaphors: 18 (flood of light, my heart leapt, life is leaving me drop by drop, my heart is light, she plagues her husband, going full sail, a healing storm, a triumphant face, roaring water, sick at heart, crack of dawn, the dark masses, first draft of life, final draft of life, thirst for life, life is all roses)

Similes: 5 (like pulling teeth, quick as a flash, like a sixth finger, life has stifled us as weeds do grass)

Symbols: 35 (clock, band, cemetery, coffin, open windows, birch trees, sunshine, dream, heart, falling hair, white birds, newspapers, seashore, golden chain, Copernicus, Columbus, yellow skirt, red blouse, scrubbed cheeks, picture frame, piano, violin, English language, German language, French language, Italian language, smoking stove, camera, samovar, basket of flowers, spinning top, 13 at table)

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A coolly systematic exercise like this is essential for learning to detect imagery that may not be obvious in plot or character. Moreover, the images still need to be theatricalized to establish their dramatic significance. A fact-based approach also reinforces the methodology of this book, in which the elementary actualities of a play form the basis for interpretation, performance, and physical production.

Poetry

Poetry refers to a particular intensity given to thoughts and feelings through imaginative and rhythmical qualities of language. Ordinary stage dialogue, for all its possible complexity, generally runs straight ahead, linking ideas one after another in sequence. Poetry, on the other hand, is always calling up past, present, and future associations from within itself at the same time. Likewise, ordinary stage dialogue reveals plot, character, and idea, while poetic dialogue adds extra complexity as literature itself. There is no need to take the time here to discuss the catalog of literary features that can be found in poetry (see Paglia, 2005). But play readers should be aware that poetic dialogue has more expressive potentials at its command than does regular stage dialogue.

Emotional peaks and valleys are expressed more vividly in poetic plays, and their rhythmic pulses are more noticeable. Short selections from two plays will help to illustrate this. One play is formally poetic, the other written in poetic prose. The first passage is from 4,7 of *Hamlet*. Claudius and Laertes have been plotting to murder Hamlet when Queen Gertrude suddenly enters with news of Ophelia's death. We will explain in a moment why the plot lines are underlined.

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QUEEN. One woe doth tread upon another's heel.

So fast they follow.

Your sister's drown'd, Laertes.

LAERTES. Drown'd?

O, where?

QUEEN. There is a willow grows ascant the brook

That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream;

There with fantastic garlands did she make
Of cornflowers, nettles, daisies, and long
purples

That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call
them.

There, on the pendant boughs her cornet weeds
Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke.
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes
spread wide,

And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and imbued
Unto that element; but long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their
drink,
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.

LAERTES. Alas, then she is drown'd!

QUEEN. Drown'd, drown'd.

The passage develops in seven steps: (1) the Queen's emotional distress, (2) the news of Ophelia's death, (3) where it happened and what Ophelia was doing there, (4) her collapse into the water, (5) how she sang as her clothes held her afloat, (6) how she sank beneath the water and drowned, and (7) Laertes' grief. As the underlining shows, the bare plot information could be conveyed with fewer than fifty words, yet Shakespeare has provided over one hundred additional words to convey the feelings and thoughts, which Ophelia's suicide calls up in the characters. We could further analyze the literary features of this passage, but no written description could do justice to its poetic beauty. For full expression, it needs to be performed by an actress who can express its music as well as its drama. Incidentally, although this passage contains excellent poetry, the same principles apply to poetry that is poor by design. Doggerel or negligent grammar or syntax can be as useful in poetry as is the good-bad prose speech discussed earlier.

The tradition of poetry has not disappeared from the modern theatre. In the last hundred years, various playwrights have made attempts to achieve in the theatre the passionate feelings of which poetry is capable. Some authors, like William Butler Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Maxwell Anderson, returned to writing openly poetic dialogue. Others, like August Strindberg, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Samuel Beckett, August Wilson, David Mamet, Harold Pinter, and Sam Shepard have written prose that can often be as expressive as poetry. In some of the best plays, the dividing line between prose and poetry is not easy to define. Modern poetic dialogue does not conform to rules; its poetic flavor is all its own. But it is poetic in the sense of how it is used in the play and from the context, not just from content or form.

Charm

Charm refers to the capability of stage dialogue power to please through wit, irony, gracefulness, or surprise. Some of the most charming qualities of *The School for Scandal* and *Angels in America*, for example, are the witty remarks and graceful turns of phrase spoken by the characters. The large measure of ironic humor in *The Wild Duck* and *Three Sisters* is one reason these early realistic plays retain their appeal for contemporary audiences. Brecht may be a social dramatist, but the surprising literary inversions ("How can you have morality without a war?") and musical interludes found in *Mother Courage* are essential parts of its verbal appeal.

The poetic charm of Sam Shepard's prose has been well documented. Here is a passage from *A Lie of the Mind* in which Sally interrupts her brother Jake, who is secretly preparing to run away to find Beth. Jake is shaving in front of a mirror.

JAKE. (*Whispers.*) Don't think about her feet or her calves or her knees or her thighs or her waist or her hips or her ribs or her tits or her armpits or her shoulders or her neck or her face or her eyes or her hair or her lips. Especially not her lips. Don't think about any of these things. You'll be much better off.

(*He turns upstage just as SALLY enters through the up left door, wearing a jacket, jeans, and western boots and carrying a suitcase. Pause. SALLY closes the door, then turns back to JAKE. She keeps hold of the suitcase.*)

SALLY. How're you feelin', Jake?

JAKE. Me?

(*Pause. He moves fast to the bed, pulls the flag off his neck as he crosses, kneels down beside the bed, stuffs the flag under the bed, pulls out a small black toilet case, unzips it, puts the shaver inside, zips it back up, and shoves it back under the bed. He rises to his feet, then sits on the edge of the bed, facing SALLY, and rubs his knee as he stares at her. Pause.*)

SALLY. (*Sets her suitcase on floor.*) Where's Mom?

JAKE. (*Rapid speech.*) I don't worry anymore about where anybody is. I don't think about that. Anybody can move wherever they want. I just try to keep track of my own movements these days. That's enough. Have you ever tried that? To follow yourself around? Like a spy? You can wind up anywhere. It's amazing. Like, just now I caught myself shaving. I was right over there. Shaving my face. I didn't know I was doing that until just now. It's kinda scary, ya know.

SALLY. Scary?

JAKE. Yeah. I mean there's a possibility that you could do something that you didn't even know about. You could be somewhere that you couldn't even remember being. Has that ever happened to you?

SALLY. No. No, it's the opposite with me. Everything just keeps repeating itself.

JAKE. Oh. Well, then you don't know what I'm talkin' about.

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A poetic mood is established with Jake's opening remarks. Sally's abrupt questions interrupt the mood. Jake follows with curt rapid speech in which he makes up a lame excuse for shaving. Jake is suspicious of Sally, whom he believes will prevent him from leaving. The plot is not complicated here, but the mood created by the dialogue lends the moment a disturbing quality. The poetic charm of Shepard's dialogue is part of what elevates his plays to the level of modern parables.

Dialects and Accents

A dialect is a verbal departure from what is considered standard speech. Dialects are characteristic of a particular group of speakers and have their own charm as well: "Y'all" in the American South, "Yah" in Minnesota, "Eh?" in Canada, "Cheers" in England. The regional dialects of Brooklyn, the rural South, New England, and Appalachia, not to mention the large number of contributions

from Canada and the U.K., and those of various ethnic cultures, have certainly enriched the English language. **An accent is a particular way of pronouncing standard language.** “Warsh” for wash in Cajun Louisiana, “Noo Yawk” for New York among native New Yorkers, “aboot” for about in Canada, “tomahto” for tomato in England. The appeal of accents and dialects comes from their musical intonations, creative word choices, and emotive speech rhythms. Playwrights have shown great skill in using these attractive features of language. Accents and dialects also contribute to plausibility, aid in rapid recognition of the given circumstances, and enhance emotional expression.

Dialogue in Nonrealistic Plays

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All dramatic characters, including those in nonrealistic plays, think and speak by using words and sentences. But in nonrealistic plays, these mental and verbal processes are governed principally by the thematic needs of the play. Thus, the types of language that Vladimir Nabokov identified in James Joyce’s nonrealistic novels—leisureliness; incomplete, rapid, broken, stream-of-consciousness, mistaken, ambiguous, and halting language; banalities and clichés—can be extended by inference to nonrealistic plays as well (Nabokov, 1980: 285ff.).

Leisureliness

Leisureliness in stage dialogue is unhurriedness and a slow tempo leading to an undramatic impression. Thus, nonrealism often appears to be conflict-less and lacking in power because the characters seem to talk just to kill time: talk for the sake of talking, as Eric Bentley correctly said about misreading of Beckett’s plays. Conflict seemingly evaporates, and nothing significant seems to be going on, except expression of the given circumstances of the play’s special world. For example, the general picture presented is one of leisureliness in *Happy Days*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, *The Birthday Party*, and *Fefu and Her Friends*, though similar examples occur in the other nonrealistic study plays as well. Consider the opening scene of *Top Girls* as well, where a collection of real and imaginary historical women share their life histories at a leisurely dinner party. Incidentally, Chekhov, too, imbues his dialogue with leisureliness.

On the other hand, this leisureliness and seeming-ness are essential. They provide an opportunity for thematic resonance, which is

one of the chief characteristics of nonrealistic dialogue. It makes no difference that there is minimal external action, minimal progress in the storyline. Internal action is still vividly present, not in the usual sense, but sufficient to bring the main idea into the foreground. Opinions to the contrary: nonrealistic playwrights have not run out of things to say and so fill up the time with casual conversation. To paraphrase Bentley again, they are writing about characters who find it difficult to fill *their* time with meaning. The passages where characters seem to ramble or run out of important things to talk about should be seen as disruptions of *their* continuity, not that of the author.

Incomplete, Rapid, Broken, Stream-of-Consciousness, Mistaken, Ambiguous, and Halting Language

Dialogue in nonrealistic plays typically contains examples of language that is incomplete (partial thoughts), rapid (pressured, difficult to interrupt), broken (missing necessary words), stream-of-consciousness (nonstop flow of many different thoughts), mistaken (repetitions, verbal fillers), ambiguous (humor, irony, deceit), and halting (stuttering). These peculiarities of language (Nabokov called them "stepping stones" of consciousness) are spoken aspects of a character's interior life if one also recognizes that we do not always think in words but also in images.

The following passage from Beckett's play, *Happy Days*, contains examples of most if not all of these language peculiarities.

WINNIE. Another heavenly day. Begin Winnie.
Begin your day. (toothpaste, cap) Running
out - ah well - can't be helped - Just one
of those old things - just can't be cured.
(mirror, teeth) Ah yes - Good Lord! - Good
God! -Ah well - no worse - no better/no
worse - no change. -No pain - hardly any.
(spectacles) Can't complain - no, no -
mustn't complain. -So much to be thankful
for - no pain - hardly any. -Slight headache
sometimes - occasional mild migraine. -It
comes - then goes. -Ah yes - many mercies -
great mercies - prayers perhaps not for
naught. -First thing. Last thing. Old
things. Old eyes. On, Winnie. (medicine)

Loss of spirits... lack of keenness... want of
appetite Infants... children... adults... six
level... tablespoonfuls daily Before and
after... meals... instantaneous... improvement.
Ah that's better! (lipstick) Running out.
Ah well. Mustn't complain. What is that
wonderful line, Willie? Oh fleeting joys -
oh something lasting woe. Oh this is going
to be another happy day!

Nonrealistic writing takes for granted that these peculiarities of language are plausible even though they may not be not objectively accurate or grammatically correct. In other words, peculiarities of language in nonrealistic stage dialogue are credible in the sense that they expose the internal life of the characters and therefore are inherently associated with the main idea of the play.

Banalities and Clichés

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Banalities are overused truisms, and clichés are stereotyped phrases. Their usage in nonrealistic dialogue indicates that language has lost its originality and impact, either from careless overdoing or from fear of interfering with the characters' frightening private worlds. Hence, characters are scarcely able to communicate with each other effectively: the noticeably mechanical statements of the supporting characters in *Machinal*, the flighty digressions of Winnie in *Happy Days* (as above), the talk at cross purposes in *The Birthday Party*, the inarticulateness of the characters in *American Buffalo* and *A Lie of the Mind*. Worn-out language gives tangible form to the feeling that the characters have lost touch with their authentic selves, with their humanity, and therefore with each other as well. Accepted meanings have dried up or become buried beneath a lifetime of false impressions about self-identity and reality. Again, the object of attention here is not only the "inability to communicate" but also the special dramatic world that produces such communication failures in the first place.

Summary

Subtext is a hidden meaning that is different from the direct meaning of the words, which, when spoken, are adjusted depending on

the context of the situation. **Dialogue** is the spoken conversation in a play. **Diction** refers to the technical and artistic qualities of language, specifically the selection and arrangement of words, phrases, sentences, lines, and speeches. **Abstract words** describe things that cannot be perceived by the senses. **Concrete words** describe things that can be seen and touched. **Formal words** denote elevated language, and **informal words** are simple everyday expressions. **Jargon** is specialized professional language, and **slang** is nonstandard everyday words. **Connotative words** convey more than their dictionary meaning. A **sentence** is a set of words complete in itself. **Sentence length** refers to the number of words in a sentence. **Long sentences** may be governed by a halting, insecure feeling of anxiety or perhaps by unrestrained hysterics. They may also be dictated by the complexity of the thinking or the richness of the images. **Short sentences and sentence fragments** can be harsh and piercing or else suggest weariness or dullness. Grammatically, **sentences are simple** (one main clause), **compound** (two or more main clauses connected by a conjunction), or **complex** (two or more clauses but one is subordinate and linked with a subordinating word). **Sentence rhythm** refers to patterns of verbal thought. A **line** is a single continuous statement by a specific character, typically a few sentences or less. A **speech** is an extended sequence of sentences devoted to one particular topic. **Punctuation** (periods, commas, exclamation points, question marks, ellipses, and single and double dashes) in stage dialogue is not just grammatical but also "dramatical." **Linking** refers to the thoughts and stage business that serve to connect lines of dialogue between and among the characters. **Literariness** is the use of artistic devices such as rhythmic structure, rhyme, and other patterns of sound and repetition. **Imagery** refers to mental pictures created through association with the various senses. **Poetry** refers to the particular intensity given to the expression of feelings and ideas by the use of a distinctive style and rhythm. **Charm** refers to the capability of stage dialogue power to please through wit, irony, gracefulness, or surprise. **Dialects** are verbal departures from standard language. **Accents** are particular ways of pronouncing standard language. **Leisureliness** in stage dialogue is unhurriedness and a slow tempo leading to an undramatic impression. **Incomplete sentences** are incomplete thoughts, **rapid speech** is pressured and difficult to interrupt, **broken sentences** are missing necessary words, and **stream-of-consciousness monologues** are continuous flows of very many thoughts.

Exercises for a Scene or Short Play

1. **Words.** Search for abstract words, concrete words, formal words, informal words, professional jargon, slang, and connotative words. Talk about their use by and related to specific characters.
2. **Sentences.** For one particular character, estimate the average sentence length, explore the types of sentences, and scan the rhythm of a monologue, soliloquy, and/or specific dialogue passage. Talk about these features in relation to one particular character.
3. **Punctuation.** For a scene and/or a particular role, search for examples of grammatical and dramatic punctuation; dialogue linkage by words, thoughts, and/or external action. Talk about the arrangement of sentences within a specific speech, unit, and/or scene.
4. **Poetry, charm, dialects, and accents.** Search for examples of dialogue written in prose and/or verse, examples of "charm," and examples of dialects and/or accents. Talk about their meaning in regard to specific characters.
5. **Nonrealistic dialogue.** Search for examples of leisureliness; incomplete, rapid, or broken sentences; and mistakes, ambiguities, stoppages, triteness, or stereotypes in the dialogue. Talk about the feelings they revealed in specific characters and about their role in expressing the main idea.

Tempo, Rhythm, and Mood

Tempo, Rhythm, and Mood

The words tempo, rhythm, and mood are used here to describe the feature Aristotle called music or song. Greek tragedies were written in verse accompanied by music, and Aristotle's term referred to the rhythms of the verse together with this musical accompaniment. He observed that verse and music were capable of inciting emotions directly and further recognized that this was a feature of all dramas. From this, he concluded that "music" is one of the six foundational elements of drama.

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Although not many plays are written in verse today, plays continue to employ tempos, rhythms, and moods to convey feelings just as verse and music do in other art forms. The rhythmical cadences of speech, for example, can stimulate overt emotional responses such as laughter, tears, and applause. Think of some of the great modern orators, such as John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Winston Churchill, and Nelson Mandela, among many other politicians and religious leaders. Tempo, rhythm, and mood can also stimulate subtle physical changes in breathing, heartbeat, blood pressure, and muscular tension—all associated with emotion. Regardless of whether these outcomes acquire their powers from poetry, music, or biology, the operations of tempo, rhythm, and mood can and do convey authentic feelings.

In the second part of *An Actor's Work* (2008), Stanislavsky devoted several chapters to tempo, rhythm, and mood, and their role in production. Notice that his principle of tempo-rhythm stems from the tension between external and internal tempos, rhythms, and moods in character. Michael Chekhov's practical understanding of tempo,

rhythm, and mood is evident, too. In his book *To the Actor* (1953), he distinguishes between the moods of a character in performance and the atmospheres stemming from the script itself. Tempo, rhythm, and mood may be subtle and complex subjects, but they need to be identified and understood because they help to shape the emotional experience of a play.

Tempo

Timing, speed, pace, tempo, and rhythm are separate but related concepts. They have no precise definitions in the theatre, but the descriptions offered here may be considered representative. **Timing is the temporal relationship between one spoken word and another, between a spoken word and a physical action, or between two physical actions. Speed is the measurable rate of movement or speech in real time. Pace means the observer's subjective perception of speed.** These three terms deal with features of time in performance. This chapter deals with tempo, rhythm, and mood in the play itself. All these issues are interconnected, of course, and are separated here only for teaching purposes.

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As we saw earlier, every moment in a play aims at expressing plot, character, and the main idea, as well as how these features emerge from within the script. **Here tempo refers to the amount and frequency of dramatic information, specifically how much and how often this type of information occurs.** In this particular context, tempo does not mean measurable performance speed but rather the tempo of the mental processing in a given passage of dialogue. When dialogue is crowded with new information about plot, character, or idea, mental processing is necessarily slowed down because there is a large amount of information to sort out. Mental processing is necessarily quicker when there is less new information to sort out. The questions to ask are where and when does the play present significant dramatic information, what kind of information is it, and how much of it is there. The answers to these questions, according to the sense intended here, describe tempo in the script.

In the Plot

In Chapters 2 and 3 we showed that given circumstances and background story create the static parts of the plot. In Chapter 4 we saw that plot consists of entrances and exits, blocking, physical production, and special physical activities as well as plans, and commands. In Chapter 5

we further saw that plot develops in progressions arranged in an escalating pattern of major and minor climaxes. All these issues are in effect when determining tempo in the plot.

Ibsen was an excellent craftsman when it came to conveying plot information through dialogue and arranging it in clear, logical progressions. In the scene between Gregers and his father near the end of the first act of *The Wild Duck*, the chief dramatic interest is background story. Although some character information shows up, few lines express information about character as such. One line in the scene relates to the main idea of the play, none contain any markedly literary qualities (in the English translation at least), and there is little apparent external action. The scene occurs on stage while a dinner party takes place in the adjoining room. The plans and commands in the dialogue advance in four steps: (1) Gregers blames his father for the collapse of the Ekdal family, (2) Gregers threatens to disclose his father's relationship with their former housemaid, who is now Hjalmar Ekdal's wife, (3) Gregers scorns his father's recent engagement to Mrs. Sorby, and (4) Gregers condemns his father and announces his intention to leave home and embark on his life's mission. The tempo of the passage below is slow and detailed because the dramatic information is densely packed.

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The first beat sets up Gregers' urgent wish to speak privately with his father.

GREGERS. Father, won't you stay a moment?

WERLE. (stops) What is it?

GREGERS. I must have a word with you.

WERLE. Can't it wait until we are alone?

GREGERS. No, it can't, for perhaps we shall
never be alone together.

WERLE. (drawing nearer) What do you mean by
that?

Notice the suspenseful link to the next beat in the last line: "What do you mean by that?"

Next follows a beat of twelve lines composed of rhetorical questions (a question that is asked to make a point rather than to elicit an answer) by Gregers (demands about the background story) and angry replies by Mr. Werle (counter-demands about the same events). The main topic is the incident of illegal timber harvesting, but seven related topics also emerge in two or three lines apiece. Each small topic forms its own "sub-beat," so to speak, because each one adds a

fragment of new information to advance the action: (1) the decline in the fortunes of the Ekdals, (2) the former friendship between Lieutenant Ekdal and Mr. Werle, (3) their mutual involvement in the timber incident, (4) Ekdal's responsibility in drawing up the fraudulent boundary map, (5) Ekdal's illegal cutting of the timber, (6) Werle's alleged unawareness of Ekdal's actions, and (7) the guilty verdict handed down against Ekdal, and the acquittal of Mr. Werle for lack of evidence. Sub-beats are indicated by a double bar // for clarity.

GREGERS. How has that family been allowed to go so miserably to the wall?

WERLE. You mean the Ekdals, I suppose?

GREGERS. Yes, I mean the Ekdals. // Lieutenant Ekdal was once so closely associated with you.

WERLE. Much too closely; I have felt that to my cost for many years. It is thanks to him that I—yes I—have had a kind of slur cast upon my reputation. //

GREGERS. (softly) Are you sure that he alone was to blame?

WERLE. Who else do you suppose?

GREGERS. You and he acted together in that affair of the forests—//

WERLE. But was it not Ekdal that drew the map of the tracts we had bought—that fraudulent map! // It was he who felled all the timber illegally on government property. In fact the whole management was in his hands. // I was quite in the dark as to what Lieutenant Ekdal was doing.

GREGERS. Lieutenant Ekdal himself seems to have been very much in the dark as to what he was doing.

WERLE. That may be. // But the fact remains that he was found guilty and I was acquitted.

GREGERS. Yes, I know that nothing was proved against you.

WERLE. Acquittal is acquittal.

The topic of the next beat is Mr. Werle's counter-offensive. It consists of four new sub-beats, as it were, expressed in two or three lines each

and totaling nine lines: (1) Werle's wish to put the timber incident behind him for good, (2) elder Ekdal's emotional collapse after being released from prison, (3) Werle's attempt to assist younger Ekdal with money and a job, and (4) Werle's decision not to record this "generosity" in the financial accounts of his business.

WERLE. Why do you rake up these old miseries that turned my hair gray before its time? Is that the sort of thing you have been brooding over up there all these years? I can assure you, Gregers, here in the town the whole story has been forgotten long ago—as far as I am concerned. //

GREGERS. But that unhappy Ekdal family—

WERLE. What would you have me do for those people? When Ekdal came out of prison he was a broken man, past all help. There are people in the world who dive to the bottom the moment they get a couple of slugs in their body and never come to the surface again. // You may take my word for it, Gregers, I have done all I could without positively laying myself open to all sorts of suspicion and gossip.

GREGERS. Suspicion? Oh, I see.

WERLE. I have given Ekdal copying work to do for the office, and I pay him far, far more than his work is worth.

GREGERS. (without looking at him) H'm; that I don't doubt.

WERLE. You laugh? Do you think I'm not telling you the truth? // Well, I certainly can't refer you to my books, for I never enter payments of that sort.

GREGERS. (smiles coldly) No, there are certain payments it is best to keep no account of.

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The first unit ends here and contains two beats. The remainder of the scene comprises seven more units: Gregers presses Werle to admit he paid for Hjalmar Ekdal's photography lessons and helped to set him up in business; Gregers accuses Werle of having an affair with their former housemaid and then arranging her marriage to Hjalmar

Ekdal; Werle accuses Gregers and his mother (now deceased) of conspiring against him; Werle informs Gregers of his worsening illness and his forthcoming marriage to Mrs. Sorby; Werle offers Gregers a partnership in his firm (hush money?); Gregers condemns his father's unethical behavior; Gregers announces he has found his mission in life and departs melodramatically. Because Ibsen's dialogue in this scene is jam-packed with detailed background story information, the tempo of the action is slow. It unfolds gradually, fact by fact, in tiny increments, and each fact adds a little more information to the action. Without a doubt, this scene reveals a very high level of realistic playwrighting craftsmanship.

Naturally, the tempo of the plot influences the speed with which a scene is performed. Accordingly, this scene could be performed at a snail's pace, with the actors painstakingly accenting every new piece of information. However, the plot may not need as much emphasis in modern performance as this early realistic play seems to indicate. After many years of experience with realism, audiences have been conditioned to deal with the complicated background story that is the trademark of realistic playwrighting. Contemporary staging might perform this scene somewhat faster than in the past. There might be more emphasis on the twists and turns in the relationship between Gregers and Werle, building to a climax at the end of the act. Naturally, this is a matter of interpretation.

Nonetheless, beats that are too long, or perceived as too long, can oversell a topic and weaken the dramatic tension. They may have to be performed quickly to sustain the appropriate level of emotional pressure. Beats that are too short may need expansion in performance with illustrative external action, such as the use of properties. In either case, the slow tempo of the plot *in the script itself* would remain unchanged.

Compare this scene with the similar father-son confrontation from *Death of a Salesman* studied in Chapter 8. In that scene, except for Biff's announcement to leave home, neither Biff nor Willy provide any new information to advance the plot as such. Mostly, they collect important information already spoken at separate points earlier in the play. The tempo of mental processing is swift here because most of the relevant information is already known. Once again, however, the speed of the performance will depend on individual interpretations.

In the Characters

As we saw in Chapter 6, many scenes contain information introduced expressly to reveal character. When examining a character as regards

tempo, again it is necessary to ask what sort of information explicitly about the character emerges and how frequently. The most significant amount of character information naturally occurs near the beginning of the play or when important characters appear for the first time.

The dialogue in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* offers an instructive example of character tempo in a classic play. Creon's first appearance is in Episode 2, in which Oedipus demands to know if Tiresias has ever accused him of murdering King Laius many years ago—claims and counter-claims about the background story and its consequences. Most of the scene, however, is devoted to illustrating the characters of Creon and Oedipus—behavior qualities, conflicts, values, personality traits, and relationship. In the first beat, Creon disclaims Oedipus's accusations of treason by asserting his loyalty to Athens. Underlining indicates character-related information.

CREON. Men of Thebes:

I am told that heavy accusations
Have been brought against me by King
Oedipus.

I am not the kind of man to bear this
tamely.

If in these present difficulties
He holds me accountable for any harm to him
Through anything I have said or done – why,
then,

I do not value life in this dishonor.
It is not as though this rumor touched upon
Some private indiscretion. The matter is
grave.

The fact is that I am being called disloyal
To the State, to my fellow citizens, to my
friends.

In the next beat, the Choragus (leader of the Chorus) reassures Creon that Oedipus did not mean what he said. He implies that Oedipus is impulsive and hot-tempered. However, he is reluctant to say this openly, so Creon becomes impatient. The excuses the Choragus offers to explain Oedipus' behavior reveal as much about the Choragus as they do about Oedipus.

CHORAGOS. He may have spoken in anger, not from
his mind.

CREON. But did you not hear him say that I was
the one

Who seduced the old prophet into lying?

CHORAGOS. The thing was said; I do not know how
seriously.

CREON. But you were watching him! Were his eyes
steady?

Did he look like a man in his right mind?

CHORAGOS. I do not know.

I cannot judge the behavior of great men.

Oedipus enters in the next unit, and its first beat contains eight balanced lines of dialogue. Oedipus' first five lines reinforce certain central issues in the plot. The remainder of the beat is devoted to the expression of character. We see Oedipus' excitable pride of rank contrasted with Creon's stubborn reasonableness. In the final four lines of dialogue, Oedipus ridicules Creon's literary speaking style.

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OEDIPUS. So you dared come back.

Why? How brazen of you to come to my house,
You murderer!

Do you think I do not know

That you plotted to kill me, plotted to
steal my throne?

Tell me, in God's name, am I a coward, a
fool,

That you should dream you could accomplish
this?

A fool who could not see your slippery
game?

A coward, not to fight back when I saw it?

You are the fool, Creon, are you not? Hoping
Without support or friends to get a
throne?

Thrones may be won or bought: you could do
neither.

CREON. Now listen to me. You have talked; let
me talk, too.

You cannot judge unless you know the facts.

OEDIPUS. You speak well: there is one fact; but
I find it hard

To learn from the deadliest enemy I have.
CREON. That above all I must dispute with you.
OEDIPUS. That above all I will not hear you
deny.
CREON. If you think there is anything good in
being stubborn
Against all reason, then I say you are wrong.
OEDIPUS. If you think a man can sin against his
own kind
And not be punished for it, I say you are mad.
CREON. I agree.

The next beat reinforces plot information from the previous episode with Tiresias, but the next beat returns to the expression of character. It contains a lengthy speech in which Creon stands up for himself by asserting his values. Note how he speaks formally and supports his arguments with sayings. The final beat is devoted to an exchange of short lines that emphasize the character differences between Oedipus and Creon.

CREON. But now it is my turn to question you.
OEDIPUS. Put your questions. I am no murderer.
CREON. First, then: you married my sister?
OEDIPUS. I married your sister.
CREON. And you rule the kingdom equally with
her?
OEDIPUS. Everything that she wants she has from
me.
CREON. And am I the third, equal to both of you?
OEDIPUS. That is why I call you a bad friend.
CREON. No. Reason it out, as I have done.
Think of this first: Would any sane man prefer
Power, with all a king's anxieties,
To that same power and the grace of sleep?
Certainly not I.
I have never longed for the king's power—only
his rights.
Would any wise man differ from me in this?
As matters stand, I have my way in everything
With your consent, and no responsibilities.
If I were king, I should be a slave to policy.
How could I desire a scepter more

Than what is now mine – untroubled influence?
No, I have not gone mad; I need no honors,
Except those with the perquisites I have now.
I am welcome everywhere; every man salutes me.
And those who want your favor seek my ear,
Since I know how to manage what they ask.
Should I exchange this ease for that anxiety?
Besides, no sober mind is treasonable.

I hate anarchy

And never would deal with any man who likes it.
Test what I have said. Go to the priestess
At Delphi, ask if I quoted her correctly.
And as for this other thing: if I am found
Guilty of treason with Tiresias,
Then sentence me to death! You have my word
It is a sentence I should cast my vote for—
But not without evidence!

You do wrong

When you take good men for bad, bad men for
good.

A true friend thrown aside – why, life itself
Is not more precious!

In time, you will know this well:

For time, and time alone, will show the just
man,

Though scoundrels are discovered in a day.

CHORAGOS. This is well said, and a prudent man
would ponder it.

OEDIPUS. But is he not quick in his duplicity?
And shall I not be quick to parry him?

Would you have me stand still, hold my peace,
and let

This man win everything, through my inaction?

CREON. And you want—what is it, then? To banish me?

OEDIPUS. No, not exile. It is your death I want.
So that all the world may see what treason
means.

CREON. You will persist, then? You will not
believe me?

OEDIPUS. How can I believe you?

CREON. Then you are a fool.

OEDIPUS. To save myself?
CREON. In justice, think of me.
OEDIPUS. You are evil incarnate.
CREON. But suppose that you are wrong?
OEDIPUS. Still I must rule.
CREON. But not if you rule badly.
OEDIPUS. O city, city!
CREON. It is my city, too!

The plot tempo in this unit is swift because little is revealed that is not already known. Yet, the tempo of character disclosure is restrained because so much of the dialogue is devoted to expressing the character of the participants. The stately character tempo and reliance on words instead of external actions are standard practice in classic plays. When speaking in public or a court of law, classical conventions required speakers to establish their credibility by confirming their integrity, referring to their family heritage and individual values. If these beats revealing character seem too long for modern tastes, they might be hastened in performance with illustrative character business.

In modern drama, dialogue on the subject of character tends to be expressed in shorter passages and supplemented with opportunities for illustrative external action. A useful example appears in *American Buffalo*, where Don and Bob are sitting at last night's poker table in Don's Resale Shop. They are assessing a mistake Bob made when planning for the burglary.

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DON. So?
(Pause.)
So what, Bob?
BOB. I'm sorry, Donny.
(Pause.)
DON. All right.
BOB. I'm sorry, Donny.
(Pause.)
DON. Yeah.
BOB. Maybe he's still in there.
DON. If you think that, Bob, how come you're
in here?
BOB. I came in.
(Pause.)

DON. You don't come in, Bob. You don't come in until you do a thing.

BOB. He didn't come out.

DON. What do I care, Bob, if he came out or not? You're s'posed to watch the guy, you watch him. Am I wrong?

BOB. I just went to the back.

DON. Why?

(Pause.)

Why did you do that?

BOB. 'Cause he wasn't coming out the front.

DON. Well. Bob, I'm sorry, but this isn't good enough. If you want to do business ... if we got a business deal, it isn't good enough. I want you to remember this.

BOB. I do.

DON. Yes, now ... but later, what?

(Pause.)

Just one thing, Bob. Action counts.

(Pause.)

Action counts and bullshit walks.

BOB. I only went around to see he's coming out the back.

DON. No, don't go fuck yourself around with these excuses.

(Pause.)

BOB. I'm sorry.

DON. Don't tell me you're sorry. I'm not mad at you.

BOB. You're not?

DON. (Pause.) Let's clean up here.

(BOB starts to clean up the debris around the poker table.)

Notice the concise way in which the dialogue illustrates character. Don is an idealist who wants everything to work just right, and Bob is a bungler. Each line (in fact the entire play) dramatizes this role conflict and its corresponding conflict of objectives. More character information is seen in Bob's naiveté (which we later find out is the result of drug addiction and mental incapacity) and in Don's unexpected compassion. The short and snappy dialogue is dense with character information, and

the character tempo is slow. Are there opportunities for stage business illustrating character? Notice the pauses.

In the Idea

When ideas are expressed openly in the dialogue, the tempo slows to conform to the type and amount of intellectual information presented. The slowest tempos arising from idea are found in classic plays, where the practice was to present ideas in speeches composed according to formal principles. Cleante's initial scene with Orgon in the first act of *Tartuffe*, for example, includes two very long idea speeches (set speeches). In the English translation, together they total twenty-five sentences averaging over twenty-five words each. A careful reading shows them to be expressions of the chief intellectual issues at stake in the play. Whatever tempos may be found elsewhere in the play, the idea tempo is slow and deliberate in these speeches.

Modern dramatists are inclined to incorporate talk about ideas less formally, more realistically plausible, within the character and situation. In *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller demonstrates considerable skill at expressing intellectual issues in the dialogue without obviously appearing to do so. His characters convey ideas in the form of aphorisms that sound like expressions of simple homespun values. Willy offers this advice to his sons: "The man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want." Ben advises young Biff: "Never fight fair with a stranger . . . You'll never get out of the jungle that way." Linda admonishes Biff: "A small man can be just as exhausted as a great man." Charley warns Willy: "When a deposit bottle is broken, you don't get your nickel back." These simple sayings are not meant to slow down the plot as Cleante's formal speeches do. Instead, they delay things only for a moment, like a brief retard in music, while they express a character's view of the world and either harmonize or counterpoint the main idea of the play.

Chapter 7 explained that epilogues provide opportunities for the characters to sum up the critical ideas in the play. In the epilogue for *Death of a Salesman*, Biff says about his father, "He had all the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong." Then Charley admonishes him for failing to understand Willy.

CHARLEY. Nobody dast blame this man. You don't understand. Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to life.

He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back— that's an earthquake. And then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and you're finished. Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory.

The way in which idea is expressed in this passage is characteristic of realistic playwriting in general. Charley's line is a reference to the main idea ("A salesman got to dream . . ."), but it sounds like an emotional outburst. The idea tempo is slow because his speech is lengthy and filled with intellectual content, like Cleante's mentioned above. Charley's speech, however, is realistically plausible because Miller has placed it within a solemn situation and divided it into eleven short sentences averaging only nine words each. The somber mood of the situation plus the halting progress of the words mask the intellectual content of the speech and frame it to sound like an expression of character and feeling.

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Rhythm

Rhythm is a pattern of recurring stresses, and dramatic rhythm is a pattern of tensions in the beats, units, scenes, and acts—a pulsing sensation that occurs when the dramatic intensity rises and falls in a progression or progressions. Rhythm operates the same way in drama as it does in poetry and music in that it uses recurring stresses and variations in the placement of accents to stimulate feelings and associations to reinforce or counterpoint meaning. Rhythm assists progressions in building interest, maintaining suspense, developing idea, and concluding interest in the work. Dramatic rhythm does not depend on regular metrical pulses like those found in poetry or music but is built up and released in various ways.

In the Plot

To some extent, plot rhythm was treated together with Freytag's principles of dramatic structure. Freytag's point was that a plot is not a flat, featureless arrangement of events, but consists of obstacles and complications arranged to convey specific dramatic effects. Freytag's pyramid was an attempt to visualize an idealized arrangement of

such features. But in doing so, Freytag also provided a picture of plot rhythm. By visualizing the maximum and minimum scenes of tension as he did, it is possible to obtain an actual image of the rhythm of the plot. This method is not the only way to explore rhythm, however. Readers could also scan the emotional pulses in a series of events, something like scanning verse. Collecting the emotional pulses into groups may furnish a narrative description of the rhythm. What we are attempting to discover here is how pulses of emotional tension collect and develop to express plot rhythm.

Director Tyrone Guthrie believed one who wishes to know a play well ought to be able to observe its rhythm as a graph similar to a patient's hospital chart or a company's sales statistics. In other words, the reader can see the emotional peaks and valleys and picture the shape of the scene in a graphic form that exposes the rhythm of the plot. The vertical axis would show emotional tensions, and the horizontal axis would show acts and scenes. Graphing like this would also help to illustrate the rhythmic relationship among the scenes. Ideally, each scene would produce its own small graph, and in the end, a graph of each act would emerge to show the rhythmic peaks and valleys of the entire play.

To understand plot rhythm narratively, we will explore the opening scene from *The Wild Duck*. It takes place in Werle's study, where the servants are putting things in order (first rhythmic pulse) while a dinner party is underway in the adjoining dining room (ongoing rhythmic counter-pulse). Petersen lights a lamp and scoffs, "Listen to them, Jensen!" Then he starts a whispered conversation about Mr. Werle and his son, Gregers (second rhythmic pulse). During their conversation, hired waiters can be seen at work through the doorway upstage center, with chatter and laughter coming from the dining room. As the two servants on stage are speaking, the side door opens and Old Ekdal bursts in, drunk. Petersen says, "Good Lord!—What do you want here?" and Ekdal asks to be allowed into the office to pick up his salary (third rhythmic pulse). After Ekdal goes through the room into the adjacent office, Jensen asks skeptically, "Is he one of the office people?" Next is a restrained conversation about Old Ekdal (fourth rhythmic pulse). Soon Petersen hears the dinner party breaking up and warns Jensen, "Sh! They're leaving the table" (fifth rhythmic pulse). The double doors are thrown wide open, and Mrs. Sorby enters (sixth rhythmic pulse). The two servants stop their conversation and hurry on to perform their duties. The rhythm in this scene is controlled by the tension of the first whispered conversation about Werle and Gregers, the increase in

suspense accompanying Ekdal's surprise appearance, the tension of the second whispered conversation about Ekdal, and the interruption of the conversation when Mrs. Sorby appears with guests. Moreover, the scene is continually accompanied by a rhythmic counter-pulse from the adjoining room.

Plot rhythm arises from the structure of the play itself, but it requires performance and physical production to actualize this rhythm. Although awareness of plot rhythm begins with knowing what is going on in the script, it needs contributions from all the physical elements of production as well.

In the Characters

Character rhythm is the pattern formed by the psychological changes in a character. How much change occurs in a character from beginning to end? How much from one entrance to the next? In his valuable handbook, *Acting: The First Six Lessons*, Richard Boleslavsky (1977 [1933]) provided a visual explanation of character rhythm. He and his student took a nonstop elevator ride to the top floor of New York's Empire State Building. When they emerged from the elevator on the 102nd floor, they were exhilarated by the view. Boleslavsky explained that the reason they were exhilarated was that the sensation was vastly different from that on street level. He said that if they had ascended one floor at a time instead of nonstop, they would still know where they were and how high. They would again see the change at the top, but there would be none of the previous feelings of exhilaration because the view from one floor to the next does not change very much. The final view would be the same, but the gradual, step-by-step manner of getting there would make it a different experience, less exhilarating.

The thrill Boleslavsky and his student experienced arose from several sources: (1) the sudden shutting-out of the complex sights and sounds at street level when they stepped into the quiet elevator; (2) the silent, accelerated ascent through space; and (3) the infinite expanse of open space that greeted them when they emerged on the top-floor viewing deck. They were transported from a world of noisy, chaotic impressions, placed in an isolation chamber, and then thrust into a new world of openness, freedom, and windy silence.

Boleslavsky's lesson illustrates how rhythm operates in the illustration of character. Hamlet is different at the end of the play, for example, than he was at the beginning. We will not argue whether he has actually changed or only revealed traits that were hidden at

the outset. The point is that however they may occur, the changes in Hamlet's character have occurred in small increments, one scene at a time. The rhythm of Hamlet's character development is slow and steady, and the final effect is cumulative rather than surprising. Character rhythm also operates like this in *Death of a Salesman*, *American Buffalo*, and *The Lower Depths*.

On the other hand, Oedipus changes from an arrogant dictator to a suffering outcast in five enormous leaps. His character is markedly different from one episode to the next, and the emotional impact of his final appearance is that much more significant because of these rhythmic leaps. Orgon demonstrates a similar character rhythm in *Tartuffe*, as does Walter in *A Raisin in the Sun*, and Jake in *A Lie of the Mind*.

Mood and Atmosphere

First, let's standardize some definitions. **Mood here refers to the particular state of mind or feeling embodied in a character, and atmosphere refers to the general feeling of a scene or an entire play.** Atmosphere is also suggested by the physical production. Script, performance, and each element of physical production come together on stage, of course, but the subject treated here is mood and atmosphere in the closed system of the play—the starting point for physicalizing these features in performance and physical production.

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In the Given Circumstances

The primary purpose of the given circumstances is to create the fictional reality in which the action takes place, which is not only a physical locale but also an emotional atmosphere. Seventeenth-century, war-torn Europe creates an atmosphere of weariness, vigilance, and danger in *Mother Courage*. The seasons (fall and winter) and the locales (an empty highway, a half-demolished church, an army camp, etc.) suggest atmospheres adjusted for individual scenes. *American Buffalo*'s untidy collection of useless objects in Don's Resale Shop creates an atmosphere of disorganization and failed hopes. In *The Wild Duck*, the luxurious atmosphere in the dining room—a dinner party, bustling servants, chatter and laughter, sparkling candles, piano music, expensive furnishings, and party decorations—counterpoints the tense atmosphere of the action in the study. Compare this to the atmosphere created by the given circumstances in the rest of the play, which takes place in Hjalmar

Ekdal's flat. Instead of wealth and family conflict, there is an atmosphere of genteel scarcity and family harmony.

Chekhov is often considered a playwright of atmospheres. In *The Joy of Rehearsal* (2006), Russian director Anatoly Efros explained his understanding of this feature for each act of *Three Sisters*. Notice the atmospheres are not laid on by Efros but generated from the given circumstances, namely the time of day.

The first act of *Three Sisters* takes place in the morning. The second in the evening. The third at night. And the fourth again in the morning.

Morning: hopes, sunshine, Sunday breakfast, name days. But in the morning, there is also melancholy. Because of yesterday's unfortunate events, yesterday's suffering.

Evening: company, the table full of food, chit-chat, disputes, quarrels, cheerfulness, and nervous uneasiness.

Night: sleep, nightmares, hysterics, overwrought impressions. Morning again: departures, hangovers, denouement. The pallor of the faces and ennui in the postures. The need for work. And again hope.

(Efros, 2006: 20)

Readers can identify many other examples that show how the given circumstances suggest the atmosphere of the play as well as its physical reality.

In the Plot

The emotional dynamics of the plot supply the most immediately apparent examples of atmosphere. Murder mysteries and thrillers are good instances of this principle at work. The atmospheres created by the tensions, suspense, and surprises in whodunits and horror stories are a significant part of their popular appeal. Though character is the dominant element in *Hamlet*, it also contains scenes of mystery, intrigue, lyricism, humor, horror, pomp and circumstance, irony, and conspiracy and concludes with savage killings and a military funeral procession—all of which have an influence on the play's general atmosphere as well. *Machinal* and *Angels in America* are further examples of wide-ranging plot dynamics influencing the atmosphere. Some playwrights take the opposite approach. The comparatively

inactive plots of *Happy Days* and *American Buffalo* are keys to their unique atmospheres. In these plays, the tensions *withheld* in the plot contribute to their general atmosphere.

In the Characters

Characters evoke moods through their motives, actions, and desires. In Molière's *Tartuffe*, consider Tartuffe's audacious and clever hypocrisy, Dorine's merry rebelliousness, Mariane's romantic affection, and Orgon's impulsive temperament. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, consider Mama's moral strength, Walter's longing, Ruth's forbearance, Asagai's optimism, and Beneatha's exuberance. The leading characters in *Mother Courage* and *Death of a Salesman* are also memorable for the particular moods they personify.

Some characters are so compelling that their moods determine the general atmosphere of the entire play. Jake's quirky moods influence the atmosphere of *A Lie of the Mind*, and the boisterous and disorderly mood of Boy Willie affects the atmosphere of *The Piano Lesson*. The individual moods of Goldberg and McCann evoke atmosphere of mystery and danger in *The Birthday Party*.

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In the Idea

Spirited feelings arise when ideas in the play make direct contact with real-world ideas about politics, economics, science, religion, and art. The ideas in *Mother Courage* were so provocative that its initial productions in this country angered audiences in the politically conservative 1950s. When *Death of a Salesman* was produced in 1949, it was not unusual for men in the audience to weep openly. Its ideas were felt sharply and movingly in the post-World War II economic boom. The anti-capitalist implications of *Death of a Salesman* were also the subject of spirited debate in the press. Tony Kushner's 1992 play *Angels in America* is another instance of idea creating strong atmospheric values. The motifs of homosexuality and political conservatism in the play incited audiences emotionally and at the same time made them think. As discussed in Chapter 7, dramatists employ ideas in the belief that they will evoke not just emotional responses but also intellectual discussion.

Tempo, Rhythm, and Mood in Nonrealistic Plays

The unusual tempos, rhythms, and moods in nonrealistic plays are a result of intentional *displacements*. By displacement, we mean

something unexpected, either because it is side by side with something it is not usually coupled with or because it is seemingly illogical. Ordinary things take on unique qualities when they are shifted into a different context. A friend from work seen at a dinner party or a movie star seen mowing the lawn are within the range of ordinary experience, but in the world of nonrealistic plays strange feelings can be stirred up through such displacements. Consider the displacements in Edward Hopper's paintings. They may look like ordinary life because they show ordinary people in everyday locales, but they stir up feelings of loneliness, isolation, and pain because their inhabitants are emotionally displaced from the ordinary life otherwise present in the paintings. It feels like something disturbing has just happened or is about to happen.

A birthday party typically evokes a happy feeling, but in Pinter's eponymous play the presence of Goldberg and McCann—displaced as they are from their usual gangster-like environment—stirs up feelings of fear, mystery, and danger in a bourgeois rooming house. The ordinary married couple in *Happy Days* is displaced in an expanse of scorched earth. In *Top Girls* the historical and mythological figures are displaced in a modern restaurant at a dinner party with Marlene. Associations emerging from a line of dialogue and its accompanying action can be a source of displacement. "Haven't you got anything better to do than to monkey around with weapons and [American] flags?" Baylor says to his son, Mike, in *A Lie of the Mind*.

Locales are another potential source of displacement. Sometimes nonrealistic plays provide information about a specific or general locale, yet if little direct reference is made to the outside world, the overall impression seems displaced. The "Sweden, Poland, Germany" of *Mother Courage and Her Children*; the generic locales in *Machinal*, *Angels in America* (not including the dream scenes), and *Fefu and Her Friends*; and the "place without any visible character" in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*—these locales could be somewhere, nowhere, everywhere, or all places simultaneously. The absence of a tangible connection to the outside world displaces the action and creates unusual feelings of distance, separation, mystery, and sometimes danger.

It can be a real challenge to recognize and then physicalize the tempos, rhythms, and moods in nonrealistic plays. However, accurate understanding and insightful physical production are essential for accurate theatricalization of these features. The so-called ambiguity of the tempos, rhythms, and moods in these plays is what gives them their particular fascination.

Summary

Timing is the temporal relationship between one spoken word and another, between a spoken word and a physical action, or between two physical actions. **Speed** is the measurable rate of movement or speech in real time. **Pace** means the observer's subjective perception of speed. **Timing, speed, and pace** stem from the play in performance. **Tempo** refers to how much and how often information of a particular type occurs in a given progression or progressions in the play itself. **Rhythm** is a pattern of recurring stresses, and **dramatic rhythm** is a pattern of tensions in the beats, units, scenes, and acts—a pulsing sensation that occurs when the dramatic intensity rises and falls in a progression or progressions. **Mood** refers to the particular state of mind or feeling embodied in a character. **Atmosphere** refers to the general feeling stemming from a scene or an entire play. **Tempo, rhythm, and mood/atmosphere** stem from the given circumstances, plot, characters, and ideas.

Exercises for a Scene or Short Play

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1. Explore how much and how often information about plot, character, and idea appears in a given scene. Explore where most of this information is presented and which characters express it most often. Explore the relationship between the density of such information and physical production, in particular scenery and staging.
2. Explore how the emotional tensions collect and develop in a scene, an act, and the whole play by means of a visual graph. Explore how much the protagonist changes from scene to scene and from the beginning of the play to the end.
3. Explore any atmospheric feelings associated with the given circumstances and any strong moods or states of mind associated with specific characters. Explore the controlling atmosphere of the play and the contributions of the leading character and given circumstances to that atmosphere. Identify and critically assess how each element of physical production might support or contrast with the play's controlling atmosphere.

Style

Style

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The preceding chapters studied the issue of form; that is, the separate parts of a play and how they work individually. This chapter studies the issue of style. In production, style is the personality of the actors, directors, or designers imprinted on their work. Also related to production is historical style, which is based on the period in which a play originated and aims to recreate an illusion of historical authenticity. In the play script itself, on the other hand, style is that unique combination of plot, character, idea, dialogue, and tempo-rhythm-mood that is characteristic of a particular play, playwright, or group of playwrights; not the features themselves, but the way they are treated. This understanding is what is meant here by the term *style*, and to understand it this chapter will return to the essential parts of a play to reconsider how they are handled—except that this time we will study how they are shaped and how they relate to each other and the entire play, instead of what they are and how they work singly. Separating script analysis into form and style phases involves some repetition, but we hope to show that this approach has its benefits.

Style as a Departure from Realism

For the last 150 years, playwrights have been inclined to write realistic plays and audiences have been similarly ready to anticipate them from playwrights. It is not crucial here to understand why this is so, but it is crucial to recognize that realism is not the objectively honest expression of everyday life it appears to be. Although realistic dialogue begins with

everyday speech, nevertheless playwrights have transformed everyday speech into an intensely moving vehicle for communicating feelings and thoughts. Similar transformations have taken place insofar as ordinary "persons on the street" have grown into complex dramatic characters, and ordinary everyday locales have come to possess both obvious aesthetic appeal and sharp philosophical meaning. In other words, realism is a particular mode of dramatic writing—a style in and of itself. Thus, even though realism may be generally understood as an unbiased representation of "things as they are," it takes a great deal of dramatic imagination and writing skill to make this "representation" a convincing version of "things as they are."

Because realism is so omnipresent and recognizable, it is also the least demanding style to grasp mentally. That being so, in this chapter and for teaching purposes, style refers to the degree to which an element of the play departs from the conventional expectations of realism. In other words, style begins whenever selected elements of a play are unexpectedly expanded, reduced, or disarranged compared with conventional realism.

Given Circumstances

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Time

Time is a point of style when its treatment departs from linear, chronological expectations. Besides the standard forward progress of time in *Death of a Salesman*, for example, there are also flashbacks (scenes from the past inserted into the flow of the present) and reveries (dreamy meditations) that take place outside of clock or calendar time. Furthermore, there are no transition moments to signal the changes between present, past, and imagined time. Time is treated with similar freedom in *Angels in America*. The dramatic time covered by this play (including the epilogue) is the four years between 1986 and 1990. Within these limits, time generally moves forward chronologically, but there are also split scenes that take place in two places at the same time, flashbacks, and dream scenes that occur in imagined time. Disarranged treatment of time is also a stylistic feature of *A Lie of the Mind* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

Plays written in this manner emphasize the essential issues and restrict themselves to those alone, without the need to deal with the writing expectations of standard realism. The action moves directly to its most crucial moments without delay. Shepard and Kushner

take this idea even further than Miller did by eliminating almost any references to time of day. Taken away are most of the usual entrances and exits, the lighting or dimming of lamps, the putting on or taking off of coats and hats, the "Good mornings" and "Good nights," and all the other details needed to indicate time realistically in the dialogue. As a result, we are dropped directly into the stream of the action in the manner of films. This practice is a departure from the realistic treatment of time found in *The Wild Duck* and *The Piano Lesson*. However, it is not new. It is a return to Shakespeare's liberated treatment of time.

Dramatic time in Beckett's *Happy Days* stands still throughout the entire play. There is no realistic "passage of time." The harsh white light never changes, and a loud bell is a signal for Winnie and Willie to wake and sleep. Winnie often speaks about time, but when she does so, it only emphasizes the fact that for her and Willie time in the conventional sense no longer exists.

In these examples, the treatment of time intentionally departs from standard realistic expectations and by this means becomes a point of style, a point of difference.

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Place

Place is a point of style when the play depicts unfamiliar locales or when familiar locales are depicted in a way that is not customary or ordinary. The attic in *The Wild Duck* is an example. Ibsen describes the attic in extraordinary detail compared with other locales in the play. The attic contains "odd nooks and corners, stovepipes running through it from the rooms below and a skylight through which clear moonbeams shine in." Inside are doves flying about, hens cackling, rabbits and other small animals, different small trees, and the wild duck. Access is through a sliding door in the back wall of the studio through a special see-through curtain: "the lower part consisting of a piece of old sailcloth, the upper part of a stretched fishing net." Old Ekdal treats the attic as if it were a place of pilgrimage, Hjalmar uses it as a hideaway, and Hedvig shoots herself there. In *The Wild Duck*, the attic has symbolic importance, and its design and usage are stylistic points in performance as well as physical production.

In addition to unfamiliar locales and unusual treatments, multiple locales and complex changes of locale can also be thought of as points of style. The Loman house in *Death of a Salesman* suggests a realistic house, of course, but it also needs to provide sufficient spatial flexibility to account for the disarrangements of time in the play.

How, for example, do the characters manage to change their costumes when they appear in adjacent scenes but in different time frames? How should the lighting changes be handled? These practical needs will inevitably produce stylistic features in physical production.

Machinal contains multiple locales: an office, kitchen, hotel bedroom, room in a hospital, bar, a "dark room," sitting room, courtroom, and prison cell. The succession of locales, generically urban big business in nature, contributes to the feeling of busy, noisy, and repetitive activity in the play, which counterpoints the Young Woman's psychological dilemma. In the same way, the multiple locales in *Mother Courage* contribute to the style of that play. The action travels all over central Europe, yet the constant presence of the canteen wagon accents the ubiquity of capitalism, even in the most primitive of human activities. Multiple locales are also characteristic of *Hamlet* and *Angels in America*. *Hamlet* occurs in and around the castle of Elsinore and in imaginary space, while *Angels in America* occurs in and around New York City and in imaginary space. What are the similarities and differences in the use of multiple locales for these two plays?

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Background Story

Content

Customarily, realistic background story is composed mainly of events with a lesser amount of character descriptions and feelings, but it is also true that sometimes character descriptions and feelings will play a more significant role in the background story. **Thus, background story content is a point of style when it involves the conspicuous presence of feelings, character descriptions, and sensory responses.** Consider a realistic play such as *American Buffalo*. The coin collector's purchase of the buffalo-head nickel from Don and the planning of the burglary by Don and Bob comprise the events in the background story; that is, events that directly motivate onstage action. Other parts of the background story are crucial for expressing the atmosphere; namely, last night's card game, the dispute between Fletch and Ruthie about the stolen pig iron, the cheap diner operated by Ruthie and Gracie, the fact that Teach pawned his watch. These background story facts express the environment the characters inhabit (always on the edge of falling apart), the characters' circle of friends (all failures), the relationships among the characters (dysfunctional), the weather (always bad), and the law (omnipresent threat of the police); in other

words, the insecurity of life in general. Very little of onstage action by itself is motivated by these crucial issues of atmosphere. The importance the characters attach to such mundane facts is a mark of the play's ironic atmosphere and Mamet's signature style.

Strategies for Disclosure

One challenge involved in realistic playwriting is the time and skill needed to establish ordinary plausibility. In addition to considerations of the physical production, characters must be occupied with ordinary everyday tasks and speak in ordinary everyday ways. They must observe all the details of ordinary everyday life to make what is going on seem realistically plausible. This practice is above all true for background story. It takes a great deal of stage time and writing skill to fit in all the technical devices, flourishes, formulas, and conventions—which any type of playwriting is full of—and shape them into a plausible imitation of reality. This fact means that, besides the content and technique of background story, **there is also the possibility of style in the strategies used for disclosing it.** The strategy for disclosing background story is a point of style when plausible, realistic strategies are absent, or, more accurately, in the expansion of what constitutes a plausible strategy. In *American Buffalo*, *The Birthday Party*, *Fefu and Her Friends*, and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* the past is often disclosed seemingly without a convincing reason. Characters talk about the past at outwardly illogical moments in the play. The style point here is that many playwrights do not concern themselves with the externals of realism in their work. They distribute background story whenever and wherever they feel it is dramatically necessary and they use whatever method suits the needs of the moment. Background story is not handled clumsily but only handled in such a way as to devote more attention to developing plot, character, and particularly idea.

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Plot

Genre

Genre is a theoretical category of drama, art, and literature characterized by a specific form, content, and style. The purpose behind studying genre here is not to comply with general categories, but to understand the emotional spirit of a play as the groundwork for acting, directing, and design. For the moment, it is enough to know that in comedies unhappy situations are prevented from becoming so

unhappy that they undermine the comic atmosphere, and in tragedies, serious situations develop to the fullest possible extent to reinforce the tragic atmosphere. In other words, it is the types of actions depicted in a play that determine its genre.

Classical, historical, and early realistic plays tended to follow established principles of unity and harmony, thus favoring a uniform genre: comedy, tragedy, melodrama, or farce. Comedies, such as *The School for Scandal*, depicted unserious incidents and concluded with unserious (happy) endings. Tragedies, such as *Oedipus Rex*, contained serious incidents and concluded with serious (unhappy) endings. In departing from this type of uniformity, mixing the actions of one genre with those of another is a point of style. Indeed, mixing genres is probably the more common practice. A list of genres and their mixed styles might include burlesque/exaggerated comedy (*Fefu and Her Friends*), classical tragedy (*Oedipus Rex*), comedy of ideas (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*), comedy of manners (*The School for Scandal*), domestic drama (*The Wild Duck*), modern tragedy (*Death of a Salesman*), satire (*Top Girls*), social drama (*The Lower Depths*, *A Raisin in the Sun*), tragicomedy (*A Lie of the Mind*), and so on. Naturally, each genre in a mixed genre play needs to be understood and expressed in keeping with its distinctive nature. Otherwise, there is no real mix, and the stylistic point is absent.

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Causation

Causation refers to a relationship between events such that one or more are the result of another or others. Causation is the most common means of organization; that is to say, most plots lead through a series of successive, apparently inevitable events from an initial situation to its logical conclusion without anything missing or out of place. Causation is the organizational basis for plays such as *Tartuffe*, *The School for Scandal*, *The Wild Duck*, *Death of a Salesman*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Piano Lesson*, and *Three Sisters*. In the opening lines, questions, forebodings, and possibilities are raised that carry interest from scene to scene and act to act on the way to a logical conclusion.

Not all plays maintain causation so strictly. Sometimes events intrude to break up the chain of causality. *Oedipus Rex* is interrupted by choral interludes that stop the causal flow of action to comment on the play's thematic implications. The forward motion of the story in *Hamlet* comes to a stop while the leading characters pause with soliloquies or monologues to evaluate what they are doing. Signs, songs, and journalistic and cabaret devices interrupt the chain of causality in

Mother Courage. The reasons for such interruptions are found not only in their ordinary associations with plot or character (as are the numerous monologues and set speeches in *The Lower Depths*, for example) but also in their direct associations with the play's main idea.

Some plays tend to depict causally related events only partially or even not at all. Consider *Fefu and Her Friends*. In Part 1 the characters meet and greet each other in a realistic scene typical of everyday life. Part 2 contains three synchronized realistic scenes (in the backyard, the study, and the kitchen) in which set speeches comprise most of the dialogue. Part 3 is a realistic scene organized mostly by causation, but it is interrupted by several set speeches that seem to defy realism. Fornes's play is not organized wholly by causation. Like many if not most nonrealistic plays, *Fefu* is a purposely exaggerated expression of an idea. This kind of organization might be perplexing, but it is essential to understand how it works. Successful presentations of Brecht, Stoppard, Churchill, Pinter, Shepard, and Kushner (to name only a few) depend on it.

Simple and Complex Plots

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Since realistic plays commonly employ a complex plot (recognition and reversal), **the choice of a simple plot (without recognition or reversal) is potentially a point of style.** *The Wild Duck*, for example, may appear to employ a complex plot given that Hedvig's death appears to produce a change in the outlooks (recognitions) and destinies (reversals) of Hjalmar Ekdal and Gregers Werle. However, Ibsen points out the error of this assumption. When Gregers insists that Hedvig's suicide has changed Hjalmar for the better, Dr. Relling corrects his sentimental viewpoint: "Before a year is over, little Hedvig will be nothing to him but a pretty theme for declamation." Nor does Gregers give any indication that Hedvig's death has changed his outlook and destiny. Censured by Relling for interfering in other people's lives, Gregers replies: "I am glad that my destiny is what it is . . . to be thirteenth at table." The style point behind the use of a simple plot is Ibsen's steadfast avoidance of conventional (i.e., sentimental) conclusions—a tendency to be aware of with his plays.

Bertolt Brecht was aware of a similar issue at stake in *Mother Courage*. At the premiere he noticed that audiences tended to sympathize with Anna Fierling, viewing her as a type of heroine. Brecht, on the other hand, wanted to show that Fierling continues to surrender to the existing state of affairs just as she has done throughout the play. She has "internalized" the dehumanizing values of her world.

Brecht later altered the ending to ensure that audiences would recognize her as the unfeeling (albeit misguided by “false consciousness”) businesswoman that she is.

Chekhov employed simple plots as well. For despite the intelligence and culture of the Prozorov siblings in *Three Sisters*, in the end, they understand no more about themselves and their world than before. In the last words of the play, Olga states their problem: “If only we knew, if only we knew . . .!” In his 1940 production, by the way, Nemirovich-Danchenko’s reading of their lack of knowledge differed significantly from that of Stanislavsky’s famed 1901 production.

Plays with simple plots show events going from bad to worse, but the protagonist will not be able to discern what is right and just. That is precisely the stylistic point these plays are trying to make and what is so dramatically compelling about them. For those readers who expect characters always to come to terms with their plight, it can be frustrating to see that they will not do so. The open-ended conclusion is precisely the style point a simple plot tries to make.

Scenic Linking

Chapter 8 showed how linking occurs from one line of dialogue to another. Linking also occurs from one scene to another by reiterating information from previous scenes, thereby reinforcing the connections among scenes. Scenic linking operates this way in *Oedipus Rex*, where the murder of Laius, Oedipus’ past life, and the oracle’s prophecies are reiterated within each scene. The same practice is employed in realistic plays such as *The Lower Depths*, where background story and characters link the anecdotes and biographical fragments interspersed throughout the play. *The Wild Duck* frequently reiterates information about Hjalmar’s youth, Ekdal and Werle’s pasts, Gina’s past, Hjalmar’s marriage, Hedvig’s birthday, Werle and Hedvig’s weak eyesight, the wild duck, and the fatal pistol.

In a departure from realistic linking through plot and character, **linking scenes through the play’s main idea is a point of style.** *Top Girls* is said to be organized in nonlinear (i.e., nonrealistic) fashion because it opens with a dream scene, then switches to realistic chronological scenes, and then concludes with a flashback. The point of style here is that the beginning, middle, and end of this “nonlinear” play are not linked by plot or character but rather by the play’s main idea: the unintended consequences of success. The nonlinear scenes characteristic of *Mother Courage* (the unintended consequences of capitalism) and *Angels in America* (old beliefs die hard) are linked primarily by

their main idea, sometimes in addition to plot or character. The teachable moment here is that plays with scenes linked primarily by the main idea presuppose the prominent expression of that idea all the way through performance and physical production.

Entrances and Exits

Realistic entrances and exits are subject to ordinary causation and linkage. An entrance introduces new information, and an exit follows after the given information is developed and concluded. **Entrances and exits that interrupt the action before crucial information is fully revealed indicate a point of style.** Interruptions produce uncertainty and suspense by delaying full disclosure until later in the play. For instance, crucial information is regularly interrupted in *American Buffalo*, where the entrances and exits oblige the utter foolishness of the burglary plan to emerge gradually in bits and pieces. The plan in its entirety does not materialize until the end of Act 1. In *Death of a Salesman*, the main storyline is interrupted by the entrances (flashbacks and dream appearances) of Uncle Ben, whose important background story is cut short by his exits (rejoining the main story). The full story of Biff's premature withdrawal from high school is not fully disclosed until late in Act 2, near the play's main climax. Entrances and exits in *The Piano Lesson*, *Three Sisters*, and *A Raisin in the Sun* work in a similarly interruptive manner. The stylistic point of dramatically intentional interruptions calls for maximum tension and suspense in the action immediately before and after entrances and exits. Whodunits and thrillers make frequent use of interruptions like this.

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The Three Unities

The "three unities" refer to time, place, and action. Historically, these unities were theoretical limitations placed on the time (one day), place (one locale), and action (one plot). These days, **the three unities describe a play's "tight" or "loose" handling of time, place, and action and are a point of style.** The plays of Molière, Henrik Ibsen, David Mamet, and August Wilson are said to be "tightly constructed" because they contain single plots and an extremely limited range of time and place. Accordingly, individual scenes are inclined to be protracted, events and conversations are of the ordinary everyday variety, and locales are domestic spaces where personal conversations typically occur. Tightly constructed plays "hold the situation" longer because they can provide sufficient uninterrupted stage time desirable for detailed psychological exploration through the dialogue.

Indeed, detailed psychology is a characteristic feature of the “tightly constructed” style.

On the other hand, the plays of Shakespeare, Tony Kushner, Tom Stoppard, and Bertolt Brecht, for example, are said to be “loosely constructed” because they contain comparatively more locales, more scenes, and typically more plots. Individual scenes tend to be shorter, events and conversations are of the sociopolitical variety, and locales are of the social and political type as well. Wide-ranging treatment of time, place, and plot highlights the variety of incidents, which is a point of style. Psychological explorations tend to be restricted to soliloquies, asides, songs, and interludes supplementary to the incidents.

No clear dividing line exists between these “tight” and “loose” arrangements, but the differences can have a clear result in performance and physical production. The style point lies in the relationship between character psychology and variety of incident, each of which requires a specific amount of dialogue and stage time for satisfactory development. In the zero-sum time allotted to a play, whatever is “gained” by detailed character psychology is “lost” by a variety of incidents, and vice versa.

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Character

Method of Depiction

The ratio of narration to action in the depiction of character is a point of style. Unlike the freedom of time, place, and action available to literature, plays are typically written to conform to a two-and-a-half-hour time limit. Thus, attention must be focused on the essential features of the characters. Furthermore, most of that stage time must be devoted to the actions of only two characters: the protagonist and antagonist. Supporting characters have to be presented as economically as possible, which fact is apparent every time supporting characters are studied.

Playwriting teacher George Pierce Baker pointed out that the essential difference between character depiction in drama and fiction is precisely the difference between action and narration. A corollary to this is that narrated characters are by definition more literary (talky, static) than dramatic (concise, dynamic). However, particular characters in *Mother Courage*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *American Buffalo*, and *The Piano Lesson*, for example, do partially belong to the narrated category; whether from dramatic necessity or undramatic writing is a matter for the reader to determine after studying other features in such plays.

A typical example of a character that is almost entirely narrated for sound dramatic reasons is Haakon Werle, Gregers' father and the suspected father of Hedvig in *The Wild Duck*. The paradoxes of his personality are disclosed through narrated assessments by Gregers, Hjalmar, Gina, and Mrs. Sorby—all of whom have conflicting opinions of him. Ibsen's use of narration for this character should not be attributed to faulty or overly literary writing. By deliberately avoiding showing too much of Werle's real character, a vague impression of him is created. The true nature of Werle's character is a "red herring" (diversionary interest), since what he did in the past matters little to the real outcome of the play. The critical issue is what others think of him, in particular what Gregers and Hjalmar think of him. Other examples of intentionally narrated characters include the fathers in *Oedipus Rex*, *Death of a Salesman*, *A Lie of the Mind*, *Machinal*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Top Girls*, and *Three Sisters*.

Main Idea

Truth Value

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We have shown that dramatists select and arrange everything in a play to dramatize the main idea with force and clarity. **The main idea is ideally the most influential point of style because it expresses the meaning of the whole play.** Since a play is primarily an emotional experience, however, the philosophical value of a play's truth is necessarily less important than its emotional value. For "truth" has a different meaning in art than it has in philosophy or science. A play's main idea is considered to be "true" so long as it expresses a valid—if sometimes controversial or elusive—understanding of human action. Plays such as *Mother Courage*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *Machinal* express the unintended consequences of capitalism, an idea that some might find quite mistaken. Idealism can be a motive for high achievement and even love, though its unintended consequences as expressed in *Three Sisters*, *The Wild Duck*, and *Top Girls* show the opposite is too often the result. For these plays and others like them the main idea may be valid, and at the same time it may also be debatable. The point here is that the main idea needs to be clearly understood and expressed before it can be considered valid or not.

Dialogue

Dialogue is the most conspicuous part of a play and always an essential component of a play's style. Dialogue can appeal to audiences as

strongly as does any other feature in the play. Apart from its literary aspects, dialogue also functions as a container for plot, character, and idea. These dramatic functions may be less obvious to an untaught observer, but they are no less critical in the shaping of dialogue style.

Literariness

Literariness includes all those features of dialogue studied in Chapter 8 as well as verse forms, rhetorical or telegraphic or emotional speech, imagery and symbolism, songs, jokes, colorful and unusual words, idiomatic phrases, dialects—in short, **language that calls attention to the dialogue in itself is a point of style**. Many, many plays employ such features. *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, and *Tartuffe* contain several different verse forms as well as rhetorical speech, aphorisms, and historical “charm.” These literary features show that, even though the chief elements in these plays are character and plot, dialogue still contributes significantly to their overall styles.

The expectation of everyday talk in modern plays may lead some readers to find slight literary merit in realistic dialogue. Some modern realistic dramatists, however, also make use of literary features in their dialogue, though less markedly than their historical and classical counterparts may do. Arthur Miller’s dialogue in *Death of a Salesman*, as mentioned earlier, contains pronounced rhythms, colorful words and phrases, and emotional speeches that contribute to its style as dialogue. Dialogue is one of the main stylistic attractions of Brecht’s plays, although with Brecht the literariness of the language is unexpected because of its contrast with the homespun nature of the characters. Sophie Treadwell’s use of tempos and rhythms is not as crucial as is character revelation and idea in *Machinal*, yet the telegraphic nature of the dialogue appeals to the ear as well. Intelligence and wit are very much part of the appeal of the dialogue in *Angels in America*. Poetic language plays a significant role in the success of *The Piano Lesson* and *A Lie of the Mind*. David Mamet’s dialogue is noteworthy for its terseness and dry wit. Both classic and modern playwrights have used a rich variety of literary devices to focus attention on the stylistics of the language.

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Text/Subtext Ratio

Chapter 8 showed that dialogue in classical and historical plays tends to be expansive, while dialogue in modern plays tends to be economical. This reduction in the number of words in modern plays has important stylistic outcomes, one of which is an associated

expansion of unspoken inner tensions. Stanislavsky identified these inner tensions as subtext: the unspoken line of thought not immediately apparent in the text.

The ratio of dialogue to subtext is a point of style. Classical and historical plays tend to place more emphasis on spoken text, less on unspoken subtext. The best example here, of course, is Shakespeare, whose dialogue is expansive precisely because it is text and subtext combined. Modern dialogue is inclined to rely on a good deal of meaning not evident in the text. In the plays of Ibsen, Chekhov, and Gorky, for example, forceful expression of subtext animates the text in a profoundly psychological way. Nonrealistic plays depend on subtext as much as or more than text, which is a major stylistic factor in their elusiveness. In the plays of Beckett, Shepard, and Pinter, for instance, characters say what they mean using the fewest possible words, sometimes no words at all, yet the characters seem to understand subtle hints and veiled allusions at first hearing. Nonrealistic elusiveness like this is a sign that text/subtext ratio is a prominent feature of the play's style.

Atmosphere

Atmosphere is a point of style when it is sustained and compelling enough to be memorable in itself. Chapter 9 explained that atmosphere refers to the general feeling of a scene or an entire play, whereas mood refers to the particular state of mind or feeling embodied in a character. As well, here we are talking about features in the play itself, not performance or physical production, although they are closely related.

Among the study plays, *Three Sisters* is notable for its atmosphere of yearning desire, which is generated by Irina's yearning for love and supported by a comparable yearning for a better life by her siblings and Colonel Vershinin. Sophie Treadwell's play, *Machinal*, is noteworthy for its dreamlike and nightmarish atmosphere, which is generated by instances of telegraphic and mechanical dialogue, the exaggerated emotional quality of the actions, and the emotional associations of its locales. The bleakly comic atmosphere of *Happy Days* stems from its physical production—a traditional bourgeois couple situated in and around a mound of earth surrounded by emptiness. The atmosphere of edgy cynicism in *American Buffalo* arises from its snappy, street-smart dialogue. Consider also the atmosphere of sinister menace in *The Birthday Party*, whose atmosphere has no basis in the seemingly ordinary events taking place on stage but comes from

the mysterious power in Goldberg and McCann that everyone seems strangely to acknowledge. Character actions, locales, and dialogue are significant points of style in these plays, and starting points for performance and physical production.

Summary

Supposing realism as a reference point, style refers to the degree to which an element of the play departs from the conventional expectations of realism.

Possible Points of Style

Given circumstances: Time that departs from linear chronology. Unfamiliar locales or familiar locales depicted in a way that is not customary or ordinary. Society that emphasizes a specific social group, describing it in particular detail.

Background story: Handled in a historical or minimalist manner. Conspicuous presence of feelings, character descriptions, and sensory responses. Strategies for disclosure are plausible or exposed.

Plot: The actions of one genre mix with those of another. A simple plot. Scenes linked primarily through the play's main idea. Entrances and exits interrupt the action before crucial information is fully revealed. Time, place, and action handled markedly "loosely" or tightly." Values markedly clash. The ratio of narration to action in the depiction of character.

Main idea: Emotional or philosophical truth value. Universal or particular relevance.

Dialogue: Language that calls attention to itself. The ratio of subtext to spoken dialogue.

Atmosphere: Sustained and compelling enough to be memorable in itself.

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Exercises for a Scene or Short Play

1. Explore whether time is handled chronologically, continuously, or interruptedly. Explore how continuity of time is maintained. Explore the general and specific locales and their number. Explore how continuity of locale(s) is maintained. Explore the social groups and the play's point of view toward each. Explore the economic circumstances, political and legal circumstances,

cultural circumstances, economic circumstances, and spiritual circumstances. Explore the presence of scientific and technological information.

2. Explore the background story for the presence and frequency of events, character descriptions, feelings, and sensory impressions. Explore whether the background story is disclosed in long passages, short passages, retrospectively, in fragments throughout the play, openly stated, or disclosed through hints and allusions. Explore which characters disclose most of the background story and the dramatic situations used to justify their disclosures.
3. Explore whether the actions are serious, comic, ironic, melodramatic, or sentimental and whether different types of actions are presented simultaneously. Explore how the main conflict is first introduced. Explore whether the play's point of view toward its subject is serious, comic, ironic, critical, or parodic, including when and how that point of view is first introduced. Explore whether the incidents are arranged by cause and effect, chronologically, in progressively more intensive scenes, or from familiar to unfamiliar situations. Explore whether the resolution (action following the main climax) is handled through restatement, amplification, an emotional rallying call, or as a reversed outcome. Explore whether the plot contains a reversal of fortune for the leading character and whether the leading character comes to a new understanding of her/himself. Explore how scenes are linked, how scene openings and closings are handled, and whether the information revealed in each scene is completed or interrupted. Explore how the act endings are handled.
4. Explore whether the characters are seeking power, knowledge, love, security, change, wealth, fame, or personal fulfillment. Explore what the characters consider good and bad in the world of the play. Explore how the characters are depicted, whether through action, narration, or both.
5. Explore the ideas dealt with in the play and how they relate to one another. Explore the persuasiveness/credibility of the main idea, including the author's authority to speak about it. Explore whether the main idea is pragmatic, inventive, practical, idealistic, or moralistic.
6. Explore the dialogue for the presence and frequency of conversational or literary features. Explore the role of text compared with subtext and the ratio necessary for effective expression on stage.

7. Explore the presence of a predominant, contrasting, or mixed atmosphere, including its formative sources, whether plot, character, dialogue, or idea.
8. Identify the single primary and secondary dramatic elements in the play, whether given circumstances, plot, character, idea, dialogue, or tempo-rhythm-mood. Describe the overall style of the play in a concise, one-sentence statement, comprising the main character, main relationship, main conflict, predominant atmosphere, and genre. What does the overall style of the play suggest about the physical production? How might the features of the physical production contribute to the expressiveness of the play's intrinsic style?

A Case Study of Postmodern Drama

Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine*

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This chapter is intended to show that the formalist methods and terms from the previous chapters can be effectively used to analyze a play that critics reasonably consider an example of postmodern drama: *Hamletmachine* (1977) by Heiner Müller. Information about the postmodern viewpoint and examples of postmodern practice are examined through careful study of the formal elements that *Hamletmachine* has in common with plays generally. The chapter consists of two sections: first, a way of analyzing this unusual play while using standard methods and terms; second, an accessible explanation of the postmodern viewpoint based on the results of this analysis. It is important to mention here that although *Angels in America* is not as extreme an example of postmodern drama, it is clearly influenced by postmodern artistic principles as well.

Postmodernism has well-established connections with literature and the arts, philosophy, and criticism, architecture, economics, and politics, as well as the media, mass culture, and many other fields. Although the meaning of the term continues to evolve, a cursory Internet search will show that its preaching phase is nearly over and that many of its conventions are already widely in use in the cultural climate in which we live. That's not to say postmodernism is either a positive or negative enterprise; just that it's here to stay. The worry is that actors, directors, and designers attracted to the creative potentials of postmodernism may be undersupplied with the analytical tools

needed to understand it and, most important, actualize it on stage before an audience. What is needed, I think, is an earnest, jargon-free attempt to address this shortcoming, and in so doing to encourage new ways of thinking and expand the range of ideas about what play production is or can be.

The literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998) has argued that postmodernism involves “incredulity toward metanarratives”; that is, critical examination of any received wisdom considered “natural” and “goes without saying.” Metanarratives are those “sacred cows” or “almost-religions” regarded as immune to criticism or questioning, although they may just as often be false or problematical. Nonetheless, Lyotard argues that metanarratives are important, even crucial, because they help to give shape and meaning to a given way of life. For many persons, the most well-known examples of such necessary metanarratives would be the Torah, Bible, and Quran—accounts of the world from beginning to end that provide a way of knowing how everything is part of a particular spiritual order. Examples of other metanarratives would be the “American Dream,” “Family Values,” “British Empire,” “European Union,” “Romantic Love,” “Globalization,” “Liberalism,” “Conservatism,” and similar large-scale belief systems that cause a given way of life to be considered acceptable and meaningful. Metanarratives closer to home, simply called narratives, exist as well. Think of the blurring of real people into “Celebrities” and their lives into “Soap-Operas” for “Media” consumption. Other such narratives would include “Marriage,” “Ivy League,” “Homeless,” “Red State/Blue State,” “Neighborhood,” and many more besides. According to Lyotard, the critical study of metanarratives and narratives exposes the automatic assumptions behind how the world really works. Lyotard also argues that postmodernism is self-critical, that it offers no reliable solutions or predictions, and that its observations are always provisional and open-ended. This point is crucial to understanding the full extent of Lyotard’s viewpoint.

Although no consensus exists about postmodernism as either a period or a style, there does seem to be some partiality to Lyotard’s description. Traditional ways of understanding things are indeed giving way to active debate about a range of understandings. Individuals are seen to be coming to terms with their own personal, social, and political options as individuals. Beyond that, discussions of postmodernism can quickly become impossible to understand or interpret. For now, it will be easier to come to the subject by looking carefully at a specific example of postmodern drama. And since *Hamletmachine* (1977) is loosely based on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the main points of

its storyline should be generally clear to most readers of this book. In any case, the play is short—barely nine pages—and translations are freely available in print and electronic forms.

About Heiner Müller and *Hamletmachine*

Heiner Müller (1929–1995) is one of the most important playwrights of our time. His plays have been produced by many of the most prestigious theatre companies around the world and in many languages besides that of his native German, but, except for scholars and a cadre of enthusiasts, his work remains largely unknown in the English-speaking theatre. Some of this inattention can be attributed to the Anglo-American repertory that English-speaking audiences seem to prefer, although responsiveness to English translations of international work has been on the increase in recent years. Another reason could be Müller's preoccupation, in *Hamletmachine* and other works, with the events of modern European history, although he disagreed with this opinion, and many scholars consider him to be one of the few playwrights who can genuinely be called international.

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Two other reasons are possibly more plausible: nihilism and dramaturgical complexity. *Hamletmachine* is at heart a profoundly compassionate play; nevertheless, some of its key images are unquestionably nihilistic and, for some of us, potentially offensive. Therefore, understanding that the instances of nihilism are intended as ironic overstatements is vitally important. Irony uses ideas, words, and events to suggest the opposite of their literal meaning. In other words, the play's nihilism is not meant to be in any way supportive of moral anarchy. Instead, *Hamletmachine* artfully calls to mind the opposite—the humane in us—which, in Müller's view, is too often absent from social and political life in our time. After all, shock has stage value also: it wakes us up. In any case, nihilism is not a precondition for postmodern drama, nor, with the possible exceptions of Peter Barnes and Sarah Kane, is it a preference shared by other postmodern playwrights. Caryl Churchill, Constance Congdon, Suzan-Lori Parks, Sara Ruhl, Adam Rapp, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Rajiv Joseph, and particularly Tony Kushner are identified as postmodern dramatists too. Even though their works depend equally as much on irony and intellectual precision, their methods tend to be more comfortable than Müller's are for actors, directors, designers, and audiences to deal with.

And while on the subject of irony, another feature that is too often overlooked in *Hamletmachine* (and postmodern plays in general) is comedy, including wit, camp humor, and even self-conscious

awkwardness—all of which depend heavily on irony for their effects. The dictionary says that wit is “the ability to perceive and express in an ingeniously humorous manner the relationship between seemingly incongruous or disparate things.” And camp humor is “appreciation of manners and tastes commonly thought to be artificial, vulgar, or banal.” It may be that the texture of the irony in *Hamletmachine* is closer to Caryl Churchill’s user-friendly playfulness than Samuel Beckett’s sophisticated wittiness. A fine line exists between the serious and humorous forms of irony, and Müller’s work can be tricky to understand if this difference is taken the wrong way.

Playgoing habits, nihilistic images, unsmiling irony, and dramaturgical gracelessness are indeed reasons enough to be skittish about many plays besides those of Heiner Müller. Probably the most substantial basis for discomfort with his plays is their dramaturgy: they are complex and difficult to read, much less produce. Moreover, *Hamletmachine* is probably his most extreme example in this respect, albeit the one most often staged and analyzed. When asked about this, Müller said his plays are simply likenesses of the times in which we live. There is some truth in what he said, but there is more to it than that. His plays are tricky to make sense of because they express a view of the world that is still evolving. It is helpful to recall that the plays of Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, and Anton Chekhov were also challenging to make sense of when they first began to appear on the world stage. Their works were “not plays” as “we,” the public, traditionally understood plays to be. Public opinion of these plays changed only when their early modernist viewpoint gradually displaced that of romanticism, its predecessor. To many scholars and artists, global society is presently undergoing a similar and equally challenging paradigm shift regarding some of its basic cultural assumptions. A wide-ranging worldview, as yet open-ended, seems to be emerging that could conceivably replace or, more likely, supplement the viewpoint of modernism, which we have in many respects grown accustomed to so automatically as to be unconscious of it. It is in complicated times such as these that theatre requires what Bertolt Brecht called “complex seeing,” serious thinking-through of things, even more than has been the case in previous times.

Scholars and artists of many different stripes agree that *Hamletmachine* is unmatched as a concentrated, if sometimes obstinate and uncomfortable, representative of this emerging viewpoint, which has come to be called postmodernism. No claim is made for a complete explication of such a complicated and provocative play; nonetheless, a great deal can be learned about the postmodern viewpoint from close study of its form.

Action Analysis of *Hamletmachine*

Chain of External Events

Chapter 1 explained the chain of external events as a summarizing list of a play's major events in their original order. *Hamletmachine* helps us in this task by being formally divided into five scenes with stated titles:

1. "Family Scrap Book"
2. "The Europe of the Women"
3. "Scherzo"
4. "Pest in Buda/Battle for Greenland"
5. "Fiercely Enduring/Millenniums/In Fearful Armor"

These titles are poetic rather than eventful in the sense taught in Chapter 1, and as such, they will be more useful further ahead. At this early point, the external events taking place visually, physically, or verbally in each scene will provide more helpful descriptions. Those external events look like this:

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1. Hamlet scorns his father's funeral.
2. Ophelia rebukes Hamlet for her victimization.
3. Hamlet's teachers and family ridicule him.
4. Hamlet refuses to play his expected role.
5. Ophelia warns of violent revenge.

The chain of external events provides a hand-hold in what might otherwise appear to be a succession of disconnected images from Shakespeare's play and modern European history. At this point it is enough to understand that *Hamletmachine* is the story of an introspective man conflicted by the burden of his important responsibility, but—and here is the main point—he seeks variously to separate himself from it.

Reviewing the Facts

Each play is a new world, so the first thing to do is study that world as closely as possible, approach it as something brand new, with no apparent connections to the worlds we already know. This approach means temporarily setting aside our previous knowledge of Shakespeare's

play, modern history, and other outside issues until we understand more about Müller's play itself. Later on, of course, knowledge of the original *Hamlet*, history, and literature will all be necessary. But for now, at any rate, *who* are the characters in *Hamletmachine*, *what* is the developing story, *where* and *when* and *in what manner* does it take place, *how* did it ever begin, *why* did it come about, and *for what purpose* is it happening before us now—these are the questions to ask when reviewing the facts.

Who are these people? Although Hamlet is a single character, he appears to have three distinct personalities and three separate lines of action. It is possible to interpret this fact in various ways, but for learning purposes, these three personalities will be labeled Hamlet₁, Hamlet₂, and Hamlet₃. Hamlet₁ exists in the historical world of Shakespeare's play, and Hamlet₂ exists in the twentieth century; both are engaged in the action proactively. Hamlet₁ is the son of King Hamlet, the lately murdered monarch of Denmark, and is expected to avenge his father's death by identifying and slaying his killer. Historical Hamlet₁ is conflicted about the ruling family (his family) and their submissive followers whose false values dominate this play's primitive feudal way of life. He is especially conflicted about the task he is expected to undertake in the perpetuation of this regime. Eventually, he takes up his obligation, albeit unwillingly. Twentieth-century Hamlet₂ is also conflicted about the brutality and oppression of the world in which he lives. Unlike Shakespeare's Hamlet and Hamlet₁, twentieth-century Hamlet₂ is keen to lead an uprising against the political establishment, but then, out of a guilty conscience, he gives up and runs away. Hamlet₃ is the present-day personality who opens the play with the words "I was Hamlet" and inserts high-minded remarks (usually set off in capital letters) throughout the play. He is identified in Scene 2 as Hamlet/Chorus and acts throughout as an observer and commentator; as such he is aware that all the characters, including his own, are precise "roles," facades to protect against a guilty conscience, state tyranny, or both. Hamlet₃ reacts to events rather than taking the initiative in the usual sense. One of the challenges of *Hamletmachine* is clarifying which of these three Hamlets should have our attention and when.

We are also introduced to Ophelia, whom we presume has had a personal, if uncertain, relationship with Hamlet. It appears that she is speaking from the grave, since she recently committed suicide through various violent and self-dramatizing means. Ophelia is upset, tormented, and angry too, even more so than Hamlet is. As a

woman, she has been victimized by an aggressively paternalistic way of life and is, therefore, powerless to intervene on her behalf. She and the remaining characters appear to be constant within themselves; they do not have divided personalities in the sense that Hamlet does. Another character is Ophelia's father, Polonius, whom Hamlet spitefully reproaches for sexually (figuratively speaking) abusing his daughter. Then there is Hamlet's friend Horatio; Hamlet's relationship to him appears to be uncertain. Are they friends, as Hamlet seems to indicate, or are they enemies, for example when Hamlet identifies him unfavorably with Polonius? Two characters with whom Hamlet has a very specific relationship are Claudius, the present king, and murderer-brother of the deceased, and his mother, who is identified in the play only as Mother and characterized by her son as sexually depraved. Assorted minor characters also appear in the play, notably three deceased teachers who are angry with Hamlet for betraying their teachings, a group of women who exhibit their horrible wounds to him, assorted prominent twentieth-century political ideologues, a Madonna with a cancerous heart, and several indifferent assistants occupied with a range of practical stage activities. The unpleasantness of all these characters is depicted as larger than life.

The *what*, the plot, consists of the main plot and two subplots. The first subplot involves Hamlet₁, a politically principled prince and heir-apparent who questions his historically determined role as savior of his country. The second subplot involves Hamlet₂, an influential if politically credulous public intellectual who leads a popular uprising against an unpopular government. The main plot involves Hamlet₃, a perplexed thinker who looks on and evaluates the entire troubling situation, searches for a way to come to terms with it, and finally withdraws from society altogether, though it is uncertain whether he accomplishes this successfully or not. Hamlet₃ and Ophelia voice two opposing political ideals: political freedom vs. political terror. These three plots arrange themselves in such a multi-layered way that the play seems to have no recognizable plot at all in the traditional sense of causally organized action—which is not true, of course, but rather a carefully crafted impression on the part of the playwright.

The question of *where* is equally complicated. Though the text in Scene 1 mainly concerns the state funeral of King Hamlet, the playing space is "unlocalized"—no specific locale is indicated in the text, required by it, or necessary for it. It could take place in Hamlet's mind, in actual visible reality, in some combination of the two, or a metaphorically realized space, such as the family scrapbook of the scene's poetic title.

Scene 2 is also unlocalized, though the stage directions indicate "An enormous room," perhaps an interrogation room since Ophelia seems to be a prisoner. She describes numerous versions of her suicide, but, once again, no specific spatial connection to the text is indicated.

Scene 3 is titled "University of the Dead" (dead ideas?) and consists mainly of stage directions. There are whispers and murmurs and gravestones, while teachers with authoritative-looking books stand behind lecterns (a metaphorical cemetery?). There is a gallery with strangely disfigured women (disfigured historical ideals?) and a coffin from which Claudius and Ophelia emerge and from which Horatio later appears as well. The scene ends in a wild dance. Dialogue is sparse, only a few lines, but, once again, not connected to the locale except through the stage directions.

Scene 4 calls for a working refrigerator and three working TV sets (contemporary idols?), as well as a suit of armor with an ax. Space is identified in the stage directions as the same enormous room as Scene 2, except it has been "destroyed by Ophelia," perhaps a result of her rage against the dominance of paternalistic values of the depicted way of life. Hamlet₂ describes how he leads a popular uprising, in the middle of which he runs home and watches TV. Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, and Mao Zedong appear as naked women (unmasked ideologies?) and deliver a familiar passage from their writings. At this point, Hamlet₂ puts on the suit of armor and strikes them down with the ax. Then he runs off to the airport to board an airplane for another country.

Next is a brief interlude with stage directions indicating "Snowfall. Ice Age" (stagnation, lack of progress?). It is hard to learn anything specific about locale from this information, except that the scenic space is probably unlocalized as the previous scenes are and that a passage of time seems to be occurring. In any case, spatial clues in the text are few and uncertain.

Scene 5 contains a mixture of text and stage directions, but generally retains the use of unlocalized space. Stage directions indicate "Deep sea. Ophelia in a wheelchair. Fish, wreckage, corpses, and body-parts stream past." Aside from Ophelia trussed in a wheelchair while two men (hospital orderlies?) wrap her up in white bandages, it is hard to imagine how the stage directions or text of this scene could be illustrated on stage.

In summary, the *where* of *Hamletmachine* is a combination of unlocalized spaces, specific properties, costumes, and selected scenic items. The connections among them are sometimes explicit but just as often unspecified. What kind of world is this? Dream, nightmare,

carnival, heaven, hell, purgatory, Germany, France, Spain, United States, desert, forest, mountain, valley, sky, undersea—it could be all of these, or none, or someplace else entirely. (One of its earliest productions was a radio performance; another was an installation at an art museum. In another, the text was written in big letters on a canvas unrolling in the background. Robert Wilson directed a production in 1986 in which Müller's text was a spoken accompaniment to an independent sequence of Wilsonian images.) The specific locale does not seem as important as the events taking place and the emotional and intellectual atmosphere.

When is all this supposed to be taking place? Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was written around 1600, and its action takes place in the late medieval period, 1300–1500. Müller's play was written in 1977, while Germany was still divided into communist East Germany and independent democratic West Germany. We might expect the play's action to take place in the same period as that of Shakespeare's original, but this is not so. What is clear at these early moments in our study is Müller's repeated use of historical anachronisms. An anachronism is something or someone that does not appear within its expected frame, which, in this play, would be the historical time frame in which *Hamletmachine* would be most likely to take place. Without going into too much external information just yet, the co-presence of T. S. Eliot's influential 1933 poem, *The Wasteland* (Hamlet₁ refers to this poem in his opening line), together with a militantly post-feminist Ophelia, communist revolutionaries (Vladimir Lenin [1870–1924], Karl Marx [1818–1883], and Mao Zedong [1893–1976]), and the use of practical refrigerators and television sets, are enough signals to indicate the anachronisms are much more than what might be necessary to “update” Shakespeare's play for modern audiences. Instead, they are attempts to place the play persuasively in the present day, to highlight contemporary people, places, events, and—significantly—modern world politics.

The questions of *where* and *when* logically lead to the question of how—how the events are expressed. At this point, the concept of irony introduced at the beginning of this chapter becomes essential. Many volumes have been written about irony in art and literature; however, for our limited purposes here irony need only denote an apparent disconnection between things as they exist and what they mean. The key word here is “apparent,” because, behind the apparent disconnections, irony depends for its effect on the existence of real, if hidden, connections. Without real connections, there is no irony but only an assortment of disconnected references

meaningless in themselves. Irony is a kind of guessing game played, in this case, between the playwright and the audience through the expressive efforts of the actors, directors, and designers. This high-level guessing game—the effort to connect seemingly disconnected “somethings”—is the artistic appeal of irony for playwrights, actors, directors, and designers, as well as its hoped-for entertainment value for audiences.

Hamletmachine expresses itself in no small measure through irony. Careful reading reveals that each scene, for example, is an exaggerated expression of the destructive power of an accepted but failed political way of life, a failed political ideology. Thus, Scene 1 is more than a state funeral for a slain king; it is a funeral for a way of life we recognize as tyranny. Ophelia’s litany of suicide attempts in Scene 2 is more than an extravagant expression of her death; it is indicative of the trauma inflicted on her (and by extension all women) by a politically oppressive male-dominated way of life. Scene 3 is also ironic. Hamlet₂ is scorned by his earliest teachers, whose radical political ideologues he has unthinkingly supported, and by Ophelia, who is figuratively portrayed as a prostitute for her family’s cooperation with Denmark’s oppressive way of life. Hamlet₂ even scorns himself; plays the “whore” for what he believes to be his participation in that very way of life. The title of Scene 4 is ironic as well: “Pest in Buda.” Externally it refers to the failed Hungarian uprising of 1956, which was crushed by the armies of the former Soviet Union. But internally, ironically, the scene refers to the results of all such mechanically idealistic political uprisings. He is caught up in street demonstrations that grow increasingly violent. At one point he sees himself reflected in the glass doors of a government building under assault by the protestors. The irony of appearing to be complicit with both political factions does not escape his super-sensitive conscience, and he runs away.

Another critical moment occurs at home, where he is watching television to distract himself from thinking about what’s happening in the streets. Simultaneously, he is repulsed by the endless TV commercials with their “feel-good” ideology, an ironic contrast to what is going on outside. Here is where Hamlet₃ possibly appears as the character attempts to flee, but his flight is more symbolic than real: he wants to become an unfeeling machine, unconcerned with the disappointments of the described reality. He feels this is the only way he can free himself from the political delusions of his past. He puts on the suit of armor and ironically “murders” the political thinkers who led him down the garden path. More irony is found in Scene 5,

in which a flood has swept away (cleansed?) all civilizations. Ophelia is in a wheelchair, either forcibly so or perhaps convalescing after her suicide attempt(s). Now she identifies herself with Electra (a character from Greek drama who plotted revenge against her family) and warns that hatred, rebellion, and death will be the fate of the great cities of the world—random acts of violence in the name of retribution against the patriarchal political establishment. In an ironic twist, she is wrapped head to toe in white bandages by the orderlies; maybe she is part of a radical “sleeper cell” awaiting future instructions regarding when to carry out her dreams of political violence.

For what purpose is all this being dramatized? This question necessitates identifying the main plot, the plot which the play is primarily about and which, by definition, bears the weight of the play’s overall meaning. It is easy enough to say that the main character in this plot is Hamlet, but which one? Each of his three personalities has a separate line of action. Significantly, both historical Hamlet₁ and twentieth-century Hamlet₂ are political failures. Hamlet₁ attempts to resist the establishment, but ultimately submits to its authority and accepts his historical responsibility. Hamlet₂ also tries to rebel against the establishment, but finally runs away from the way of life it supports. What does Hamlet₃ do? He does not rebel, give in, or run away; he evaluates. This Hamlet embodies the purpose for which the play was written. Seen through the actions of Hamlet₃, *Hamletmachine* is more like a report, a general assessment of a way of life, rather than something more traditionally concrete, as are the actions of Hamlet₁ and Hamlet₂. Each event for Hamlet₃ is an occasion for a broad, complex evaluation of a given way of life, instead of merely being part of the forward motion of the plot. This important and challenging issue will be studied more closely in the final section of this chapter.

Seed

The seed, a concept introduced in Chapter 1, is the essence of the playwright’s plan, a distinctive pattern that usually remains latent and unnamed but is always present everywhere throughout the play. We might say the seed is the DNA, or genetic code, of a play. Trace evidence of the seed can usually be found by searching for signs that one of society’s generally accepted moral directives has been violated. In Aristotelian terms, this violation would be the “fatal flaw” (*hamartia*) in the leading character. When studying Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* earlier in this book, for example, the violation, or flaw, was

found in Hamlet's irresponsible idealism, his reckless passion for getting at the "truth" regardless of the consequences, namely the deaths of Ophelia, Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Laertes, and Gertrude, along with the collapse of Denmark's political independence. Accordingly, the seed of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was expressed as idealism. All four lines of action in our present Hamlet seem to be concerned with idealism too, but in the form of political idealism—affairs of state more than matters of conscience. Shakespeare's play deals with politics as well, but there politics forms a mirror image of the personal, whereas in *Hamletmachine* politics reduces the personal almost to insignificance.

How does the seed of political idealism play itself out in *Hamletmachine*? Hamlet₁ is a political idealist but compromises his ideals when he surrenders under pressure to power; Hamlet₂ is a political idealist too but runs away when the circumstances become too problematic. Both are failures as political idealists, and it is precisely these failures, along with Ophelia's perverted form of political idealism, that are the focus of Hamlet₃'s evaluations. Thus, it is safe to consider that political idealism may indeed be the seed, the primary subject, of *Hamletmachine*. Just why two political idealists are portrayed as failures and a third as perverted, and why they are all subjects of Hamlet₃'s scrutiny, are questions of the play's theme, its point of view toward the seed. But before studying this question, it will be necessary to confirm the accuracy of our proposed seed by testing and validating its presence everywhere in the play.

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Chain of Internal Events

The following is a list of the external events and associated internal events that relate to the seed of political idealism. The seed is italicized here for emphasis. Note that *Hamletmachine* is complex and warrants meticulous consideration. This chapter focuses on its most useful features and demonstrations of the postmodern impulse, and, therefore, what follows will involve a somewhat advanced level of discussion, or what Brecht called "complex seeing."

1. External Event: Hamlet scorns his father's funeral.
Internal Event: Hamlet, the *political idealist*, scorns the *false political ideals* of a brutal way of life.
2. External Event: Ophelia rebukes Hamlet for contributing to her oppression.
Internal Event: Hamlet assesses Ophelia's *radical political ideals*.

3. External Event: Hamlet's teachers and family scorn him.
Internal Event: Hamlet, the *faint-hearted political idealist*, accepts the consequences for submitting to the *false political ideals* of the establishment.
4. External Event: Hamlet refuses to play his expected role.
Internal Event: Hamlet foresees the *idealistic political revolutions* to follow, rejects the appointed role of *political savior* of the nation, and rejects the populace, the ruling class, and the *naive political ideals* of the intellectuals (including his own) for their predictably failed results, both past and future.
5. External Event: (This scene is an epilogue.) Ophelia threatens revenge.
Internal Event: Ophelia, an unashamed *radical political idealist*, warns of future violence until and unless her *radical ideals* prevail.

This chain of internal events attempts to show that the presence of the seed of political idealism throughout the play is logically consistent, though not always immediately apparent.

Three Major Climaxes

The three major climaxes identify the beginning, middle, and end of the play. Progress from one section to the next—from the initial purpose of the main character to the hardships encountered by that character while attempting to fulfill this purpose, and finally to the character's achievement (or not) of self-awareness—gives the play its sense of forward motion. In a play with only five short scenes, studying this concept should not be a difficult task.

The Ghost of Hamlet's father appears in Scene 1. Hamlet₁ rejects him, saying:

Keep your hat on. [...] What do you want of me?
Isn't one state-funeral enough for you? You
old sponger. Is there no blood on your
shoes? What's your corpse to me? [...] Shall
I, as is the custom, stick a piece of iron
into the nearest flesh?

Hamlet's action here reveals his purpose, which is to awaken others to the falseness of their political ideals. He does this not to offer a new set of ideals (that would only lead to another failed utopia), but more likely as a warning against the kind of sweeping political movements,

doctrines, or formal systems of belief that, over time, have led to or could lead to the type of failed political systems depicted in the play. Hamlet₁'s decision to reject the Ghost reveals his intended purpose, which identifies this event as a logical choice for the first major climax, the formal beginning of the action.

Since no figure of Hamlet participates actively in Scenes 2 and 5, it is safe to suppose that Scenes 3 and 4 contain the second and third major climaxes for which we are looking. Scene 3, "Scherzo" (a lively movement in a symphony or "joke" in Italian), consists almost entirely of stage directions; surely this fact makes Hamlet₁'s only line deeply significant:

OPHELIA. Do you want to eat my heart, Hamlet?

Laughs.

HAMLET₁. *Face in his hands.* I want to be a woman.

Hamlet₁ is disconsolate about the way of life around him and wishes he could summon up the same passion for his political convictions that Ophelia has for her radical feminist convictions. Next, he dresses in Ophelia's costume, Ophelia puts on him the makeup of a cheap prostitute, and he "poses as a whore" (suggestion of camp humor here?). In Scene 1 Hamlet₁ refused to accept his historical role because he hated the thought of contributing to a false way of life. In Scene 3 he is provoked into accepting that very role. Why does he humiliate himself in this way? Because fighting is contrary to his temperament and, more important, he is emotionally and physically exhausted from fighting for what he believes in. Thus, "Horatio opens an umbrella and embraces [exhausted] Hamlet." Hamlet₁'s surrender to a false way of life is the second major climax, the turning point of the play's action. From this point on we might reasonably expect his struggles to be over because he has accepted his historical role as heroic freedom fighter and savior of his nation's way of life.

But this is not what happens. For the third major climax, Scene 4 is the most workable option. The title, "Pest in Buda/Battle for Greenland," hints at the content and the outcome of Hamlet₁'s decision to submit to his historical role. The event is expressed in the form of a flashback. While Hamlet₂ removes the embarrassing costume that Hamlet₁ donned in the previous scene, he tells of his own abortive attempt to save the country when he previously attempted a rebellion against the political establishment. Abortive because of an unexpected moment when he catches a reflection of himself in the glass doors of the government building the protestors are assaulting. There he sees an image of himself reflected in both directions, namely

both with the crowd in the street and with the political authorities against whom they are protesting. Hamlet₂ experiences an epiphany, a moral awakening, and suddenly recognizes something unknown in himself before this: that he has been actively, if unknowingly, complicit in *both* sides of the conflict. When he runs home to escape from his new self-awareness, his guilt ironically reflects itself through television's never-ending displays of dystopian violence, televised dreams of "votes and bank accounts," and the mindless happiness of its commercials—all of which are absurdly contrary to the actual way of life outside. He is plagued by further guilt at the airport, where he tries to flee to another city, presumably to a more liberal way of life somewhere else, and is overcome with remorse for the special travel privileges granted to him by the authorities for his silent collaboration as a public intellectual. He no longer sees himself as Hamlet the liberator but as Macbeth the cynical murderer: "I was Macbeth." Certainly, this is a climactic moment. This notable sequence—from "I was Hamlet" to "I want to be a woman" to "I was Macbeth"—completes the sequence of three major climaxes in the play: idealist, collaborator, and finally, murderer. The essential awareness here is that Hamlet₃ is observing and evaluating Hamlet₁, Hamlet₂, and Ophelia as they attempt to put their political ideals into action.

Theme

We have said that the seed of *Hamletmachine* is political idealism, of which several forms appear in the play. Hamlet₁'s idealism is a mask for familial revenge; Hamlet₂'s a mask for opportunism; Hamlet₃'s a mask for guilt; Ophelia's a mask for nihilism.

The point of view of *Hamletmachine* toward political idealism in its present-day form is that of incredulity, or extreme skepticism, and is embodied in Hamlet₃. He is the character who exposes for assessment the dystopian consequences of misguided political idealism, including his own. The theme corresponding to the actions of Hamlet₃ could be expressed as a blunt statement of fact ("misguided political idealism"), or as a dispassionate summing-up ("The unintended outcomes of misguided political idealism"), a moral aphorism ("The price of misguided political idealism is too high"), or perhaps an ironic epigraph ("Be careful of the political ideals we wish for"). Here we must be careful to point out the play is not only a critique of misguided political idealism but also an attempt at an impartial assessment of it, while not concealing its positive moral force either. There will be more about this awareness further ahead.

Super-Objective

What is the super-objective of Hamlet₃, the main character; what does he want most of all? Chapter 5 introduced the concept of the “primary event,” the event in the background story that produces the conditions necessary for the play to happen in the first place. *Hamletmachine*’s primary event can also be a sign of Hamlet₃’s super-objective. It starts with something Hamlet₁ did at his father’s state funeral. He says,

HAMLET. I stopped the funeral procession. I
pried open the coffin with my sword, the
blade broke, yet with the blunt remainder
I succeeded, and *I dispensed my dead
procreator’s flesh to keep company with
the flesh of the bums around me.* (Scene 1,
italics added)

A horrible image and one that Hamlet₁ may not have performed but only dared to do. Regardless, the action is meaningful as far as Müller’s play is concerned. Hamlet₁ intends to reopen history (“coffin”) and compel the ruling class (“bums”) to confront its failed political way of life as the lie (“dead flesh”) it truly is. Hamlet₃’s wider intention on the occasion of the whole play is to show us, his present-day audience, that “Something is rotten in this age of hope.” His super-objective is “to expose and evaluate the outcomes of misguided political idealism.” This super-objective is framed in the familiar manner of a traditional dramatic play (see Chapter 1); however, the final section will treat it from a broader perspective.

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Through-Action

At this point, it is not hard to see that the events in *Hamletmachine* are intended to expose the consequences that follow from sticking uncritically to what author Gao Xingjian calls an “ism” (metanarrative, ideology), even though it may feel morally gratifying to do so. What is the role of our three Hamlets in this exposé? Surely the rage and humiliations experienced by Hamlet₁ and Hamlet₂ are signs that Hamlet₃ is more than a disinterested observer. He is careful to make sure that we understand his active and passive collaboration in these dystopian outcomes. Moreover, he carries out this exposé voluntarily. His decision to follow through publicly with his exposé, confession, and humiliation illustrates how spellbinding and dangerous the attraction of such

political wish-dreaming can be. After all, Hamlet₃ is not an ordinary person; he is a combination of prince, celebrity, icon, and influential public intellectual. And if misguided political idealism can delude a person such as he is (or, they are), then what about those of us with average status, average wisdom, and much less public influence?

Altogether, these points lead to a rough formulation of *Hamletmachine's* through-action: "an intellectual with conflicting idealistic impulses lays bare the political mistakes he contributed to." What is implicit in this admittedly provisional through-action is the suggestion that Hamlet₃'s enemies do not wish to play any part in this exposé and that they do so only to discredit him, while not realizing how much it reflects negatively upon themselves. Admittedly, this formulation of the through-action is intellectually challenging (requiring Brecht's "complex seeing"), and not every reader will agree with it. The important thing for our purpose here, however, is the way we have gone about building a logical case for it based on information from the play itself.

Counter Through-Action

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The challenge to Hamlet₃'s super-objective and the primary source of conflict in the play is the scorn he faces from just about everyone, but especially from Ophelia. In this respect, Müller's Ophelia is not Shakespeare's. Both historical and contemporary Ophelias are victims, and both of their deaths are outcomes of political betrayal. However, the death of Müller's Ophelia has "raised her consciousness," and by doing so, it has transformed her from a passive victim to a militant feminist, a radical political idealist. Her post-death identity forms the core of her character and reveals her as Hamlet₃'s arch-enemy. Her chief weapons are scorn and strength of will. Knowing him as well as she does, she is aware that his conscience is vulnerable and turns this fact against him as a means to frustrate his exposé. She seems to be saying, "Hamlet, you are a hypocrite and a flunky like all the rest of them!" Her scorn has a more refined dimension as well. Sometimes she appears to be taking sides with those whom Hamlet₃ is attempting to unmask. It's understandable because she is equally opposed to the establishment and largely for the same reasons—except that Ophelia seeks revolution, not simply enlightenment. To her, Hamlet₃ is a navel-gazing weakling, which is true. Hence, the counter through-action she embodies can be formulated as "a radical political feminist scorns the moral squeamishness of her lover." Mere disclosure of the establishment's injustice is not enough for Ophelia. She must also

have blood in the streets. This through-action establishes a personal conflict between Hamlet and Ophelia and as such does not always appear openly; all the same, it is an implied accompaniment to all their relations. What's more, the fact that they are both aware of this fact gives depth and sharpness to their roles by grounding them in a real personal relationship.

Formalist Analysis of *Hamletmachine*

The preceding Action Analysis has provided the gist of the play and therefore permits us to go directly to *Hamletmachine's* most significant formal qualities. What follows is a condensed formalist analysis in which selected elements of *Hamletmachine* will be studied to get more deeply inside the skin of the play. Facts will be systematically collected for further consideration in the final section. To prepare the ground for this section, readers may wish to refer to Chapters 2–9 to brush up on the ways and means of formalist analysis.

Given Circumstances and Background Story

What stands out right away is the fact that the given circumstances of place and time do not keep to traditional expectations. Presumably, the action of a play based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* would take place in the time and place of the original, but just how incorrect this presumption is becomes apparent when we consider the full range of places to which our play refers. The circumstance of time is equally diverse, moving back and forth as it does among the historical past of Shakespeare's original, the recent history of twentieth-century Europe, the present of Hamlet's exposé, and the apocalyptic future of Ophelia's epilogue, not to mention the various atemporal "dream times" that appear at multiple points.

The text of *Hamletmachine* is barely nine pages in its published form, which makes it feel more like a work-in-progress than a finished play script. The action is complicated in the sense of having many parts and being mixed up and difficult to read and understand. It's understandable because only 450 of the 2,500 words in the play refer to the on-stage story and 335 of them are stage directions. Eighty-three percent of the play is given over to a mixture of background story (real or imagined), offstage action (real or imagined), and other sorts of external information. The comprehensive treatment of time and place and the large proportion of background story are among the most peculiar given circumstances forming the special world of this play.

Plot: Progressions and Structure

In the Action Analysis above, it was shown that the structure, or arrangement of events, for both Hamlet₁ and Hamlet₂ is complex in the technical sense since both Hamlets undergo a recognition (Aristotle's *anagnorisis*) of their hidden motives while experiencing a reversal (Aristotle's *peripeteia*) of their destinies (see Chapter 5). *Hamletmachine* is primarily expressed through the image of Hamlet₃, however, whose plot contains neither recognition nor reversal. Hamlet₃ by this time understands his previously unknown motives and the serious mistakes he has made because of them. He also knows about the hidden motives of everyone else in the play. The plot of Ophelia, the play's formal antagonist, uses a different version of the same technically simple plot structure. Even though she is a prisoner throughout the play, she does not awaken to the irrationality of her motives or any possible setback in the direction of her destiny. Since Hamlet₃ is the main character and since his plot line with Ophelia is technically simple, the structure of the play as a whole is accordingly simple in the same sense. Expressing this idea differently, the structure of the main plot (Hamlet₃ vs. Ophelia), sometimes called the framing story, is technically simple, while both subplots (Hamlet₁ and Hamlet₂) inside the framing story are technically complex.

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Character

Hamlet₁₋₂₋₃ and Ophelia can be considered characters in the sense that they each embody coherent and independent lines of action. They may not be "good" or "appropriate" or "believable" or even "consistent" in the traditional (Aristotelian) sense, but we can still identify them as "characters." True, they are more inconsistent than most characters in traditional dramatic plays, but at the same time, they are more multifaceted and self-aware than the simplified characters surrounding them. Claudius, Hamlet's father and mother, Horatio, and Polonius each have identifying names but operate more like stereotypes than fully rounded characters. They do not speak, and we only see what is required of them for the actions of Hamlet and Ophelia to become apparent. Another category of characters consists of a series of women, philosophers, and a Madonna, who tend to symbolize conditions or viewpoints; they are static symbols rather than dynamic characters. Lastly, some anonymous assistants carry out the necessary stage directions during a performance. Mixing different degrees of character complexity in this way is common practice in playwriting of all sorts (see Chapter 6).

Dialogue

This chapter studies *Hamletmachine* in translation, of course, but despite this, the language of the play is undoubtedly rich in poetic prose (rhythmical prose employing poetic devices) and forms of free-verse (poetry that does not follow a fixed metrical pattern). Here are four examples:

HAMLET. Shall I

As is the custom stick a piece of iron into
The nearest flesh or the second best
To latch unto it since the world is spinning
Lord break my neck while I'm falling from an
Alehouse bench. (Scene 1)

...

OPHELIA. I am Ophelia. The one the river didn't
keep. The woman dangling from the rope. The
woman with her arteries cut open. The woman
with the overdose. (Scene 2)

...

HAMLET. I am the soldier in the gun turret;
my head is empty under the helmet, the
stifled scream under the tracks. I am
the typewriter. I tie the noose when the
ringleaders are strung up. I pull the stool
from under their feet, I break my own neck.
I am my own prisoner. I feed my own data
into the computers. My throat the neck and
the rope. I am the data bank. Bleeding in
the crowd. (Scene 4)

...

OPHELIA. This is Electra speaking. In the heart
of darkness. Under the sun of torture.
(Scene 5)

The grammar, syntax, word choice, imagery, and emotional expressiveness here would be stylish in any language. The use of such literary methods in *Hamletmachine* is one of the features that, perhaps surprisingly, adds elegance, wit, and even humor to a play that, in the hands of a less capable writer, could quickly become tediously high-minded and heavy-handed, falling victim to clichés.

The only instances of direct speech (conventional stage dialogue) are the two lines from Scene 3 studied earlier. The rest of the play is expressed through monologues and stage directions. Monologues by definition are intended to show a character's mind at work, thus forming a direct verbal connection between the actor and the audience—precisely the features that set the text of *Hamletmachine* apart from most traditional dramatic plays. Moreover, in the absence of direct speech, monologues control the amount of interaction among the characters, which here turns out to be minimal in the traditional sense (more about this ahead) and which is another distinguishing feature of the text. Perhaps one of the most significant features of monologues is their association with manifestoes, public declarations of the intentions, motives, or principles by a user. In this sense, use of the manifesto form is significant in that *Hamletmachine* may be considered a dramatic expression of Hamlet₃ and Ophelia's conflicting political manifestoes.

A further distinguishing feature of the dialogue is the wealth of references to people, places, and events outside the play. Müller was an intellectual actively engaged in public life. Aside from his occupations as a playwright and poet, what seems to have concerned him most was political philosophy and modern European history. After all, he resided in communist East Berlin, and he certainly lived in history-making times (the collapse of communism and all that followed). It is understandable that he would be interested in politics and history, and that evidence of this interest would be likely to appear in his work.

In addition to the understandable presence of political and historical references, there are also dozens of literary allusions from the works of numerous other writers, including T. S. Eliot, e. e. cummings, Friedrich Hölderlin, Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong, Friedrich Nietzsche, Boris Pasternak, John Ford (the Jacobean dramatist), Karl Marx, William Shakespeare, Walter Benjamin, Antonin Artaud, Jean-Paul Sartre, Andy Warhol, Ulrike Meinhof (of the then-notorious Red Army Faction), Inge Müller (East German poet), Squeaky Fromm (of the notorious Manson family), and the Bible, not to mention the other writings of Müller himself. Familiarity with the play's historical backgrounds and literary allusions would be required for production purposes, of course, but the critical awareness here is their existence virtually everywhere in the play, their crowdedness in a mere nine pages of text. So much so that they form an organizing principle in themselves, or at least an important substructure, for the whole play. As a playwright, however, Müller is not concerned with historical accuracy or with an

interpretation of other works; that is not the point of using so many external referents in the play. These backgrounds and allusions form an intellectual pattern that directs, focuses, and enhances the meaning of the play as a whole, another point that will be studied further ahead.

Tempo-Rhythm-Mood

Chapter 9 explained that, in this book about script analysis, the term tempo refers to the frequency and amount of information about plot, character, or idea in a given text. Tempo from this viewpoint is not related to the usual meanings of velocity or measurable speed but is closer to the idea of the density of information. Text that is crowded with information about plot, character, or idea generates a “slow” tempo owing to a large amount of information with which to contend. Text with limited information about plot, character, or idea is less dense; therefore, the tempo is “quicker” because there is less information to sort out.

Using the concepts of internal and external action from Chapter 4, how much and how often are facts about plot, character, and idea found in the text of *Hamletmachine* and to what extent does this influence the tempos of plot, character, and idea in the text? Since the *mise-en-scène* in *Hamletmachine* often is the play, stage directions will need to be studied as sources of tempo, rhythm, and mood as well. Scene 1 is selected for study, but it is safe to assume comparable outcomes throughout the rest of the play.

Carl Weber's translation of Scene 1 contains fifty-five sentences comprising 674 words, of which twelve sentences and sixty-seven words are devoted to the plot (including background story), thirty-seven sentences and 494 words to character, and six sentences covering 113 words to the idea. The use of verse and dramatic punctuation will undoubtedly lead to differences of opinion about which sentences are devoted to what topic, but the overall proportions should be clear enough: 10 percent to the plot, 73 percent to character thoughts and feelings, and 17 percent to political ideas. And since Hamlet and Ophelia are passionately outspoken about their politics to the degree that they have almost no personal lives as such, character and politics are deeply interwoven. Consequently, a mere 10 percent of the play is given over to advancing the plot, while 90 percent is devoted to exploring the characters' thoughts and feelings about political ideas. An unhurried tempo, so far as the subjects of character and idea are concerned, requires scrupulous attention to accessory details of meaning in *Hamletmachine*, features that would typically receive less emphasis in traditional dramatic plays.

Rhythm is a pulsing emotional sensation that accompanies the rising and falling of dramatic tension. In the plot, rhythm arises from the twists and turns of the progressions in a given passage of text. In Scene 1, the action proceeds in eight progressions, eight rhythmic pulses of tension and release. (1) Hamlet introduces himself. (2) He describes the state funeral with the dignitaries marching submissively behind the coffin of King Hamlet. (3) He explains a wish-dream to force open the coffin and dispense the flesh of the corpse to the "bums" trailing the coffin, particularly his mother. (4) He scorns their insincerity and bewails the lack of occasion for genuine sorrow in this rotten state of Denmark. (5) He scorns the appeals from the Ghost of his father, who insists Hamlet must revenge his murder and save the country. (6) Returning to the image of the funeral procession, he rejects the thoughtful gestures of Horatio, Polonius, and Ophelia, insisting they are all insincere, including himself, only playing their expected roles. (7) He rejects his mother's appeal to "put on a cheerful face for Denmark," threatening to smear her wedding gown (she has only just married Claudius) with earth from his father's grave. (8) He wishes to stuff his father's corpse into a sewer so that the whole palace would stink of royal waste. Despite the unsettling coarseness of the images, the dialogue nevertheless reveals a clear intellectual line leading consecutively from one character to another. We already know quite a lot about these characters from Shakespeare's original. What is significant in our scene is Hamlet's emotional line, his scorn toward the entire pretense and each of the characters caught up in it, again including himself. Eight events, eight emotional pulses, piling scorn upon disdain, in an attempt to expose every facet of the political charade that is their way of life. The inner rhythm here is like the regular measured rhythm of a march or procession (which it is genuinely) or the sequential presentation of witnesses in a courtroom trial (which it is figuratively), more than the shifting rhythms of plot and character in a traditional dramatic play.

Biting sarcasm and cutting expressions and remarks govern the mood, or emotional coloring, of the play as a whole. Examples in the leading characters (who usually embody the overall mood of a play) are not hard to find, and so a few should be enough to demonstrate the point.

HAMLET. I was Hamlet. I stood at the shore and
talked with the surf BLA BLA BLA, with the
ruins of Europe in back of me. (Scene 1)

...

OPHELIA. I am Ophelia. The one the river didn't keep. The woman dangling from the rope. The woman with her arteries cut open. (Scene 2)

...

OPHELIA. Do you want to eat my heart, Hamlet?
She Laughs. (Scene 3)

...

HAMLET. I'm not Hamlet. I don't take part anymore. My words have nothing to tell me anymore, My thoughts suck the blood of [empty] images. My drama doesn't happen anymore. Behind me the set is being put up. By people who aren't interested in my drama, for people to whom it means nothing. (Scene 4)

...

OPHELIA. This is Elektra speaking. In the heart of darkness. Under the sun of torture. To the capitals of the world. In the name of the victims. (Scene 5)

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But within the all-encompassing hostility between Hamlet and Ophelia appears a range of subtler moods created by events and in-built physical production. Selected instances include:

Loneliness:

HAMLET. Enters Horatio. Confidant of my thoughts so full of blood since the morning is contained by the empty sky. (Scene 1)

Dreamlike fantasy:

OPHELIA. Yesterday I stopped killing myself. I'm alone with my breasts my thighs my womb. (Scene 2)

Surreal mystery:

Stage Directions. *Hamlet dresses in Ophelia's clothes, Ophelia puts the make-up of a*

whore on his face, Claudius – now Hamlet's [real] father – laughs without uttering a sound, Ophelia blows Hamlet a kiss and steps with Claudius/Hamlet's Father back into the coffin. Hamlet poses as a whore. An Angel, his face at the back of his head: Horatio. He dances with Hamlet.

VOICES. *From the coffin. What thou killed thou shalt love. [Shakespeare's Sonnet 43?]*

Stage Directions. *The dance grows faster and wilder. Laughter from the coffin. On a swing, the Madonna with breast cancer. Horatio opens an umbrella, embraces Hamlet. They freeze under the umbrella, embracing. The breast cancer radiates like the sun. (Scene 3)*

Excitement:

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HAMLET. The uprising starts as a stroll. Against the traffic rules, during working hours. The street belongs to the pedestrians. Here and there, a car is turned over. Nightmare of a knife-thrower. Slowly driving down a one-way street towards an irrevocable parking space surrounded by armed pedestrians. Policemen, if in the way, are swept to the curb. When the procession approaches the government district it is stopped by a police line. People form groups, speakers arise from them. On the balcony of a government building, a man in a badly-fitting uniform appears and begins to speak too. When the first stone hits him, he retreats behind the double doors of bullet-proof glass. The call for more freedom turns into the cry for the overthrow of the government. People begin to disarm the policemen, they storm two, three buildings, a prison a police precinct an office of the secret police, they string up a dozen henchmen of the rulers by their heels, the government brings in troops, tanks. (Scene 4)

Mechanical unfeelingness:

MARX, LENIN, MAO. The Main point is to overthrow all existing conditions. (Scene 4)

Cold indifference counterpointed with increasing desperation:

Stage Directions. *Two men in white smocks wrap gauze around her and the wheelchair, [deliberately and progressively] from bottom to top.*

OPHELIA. I Take back the world I gave birth to. I choke between my thighs the world I gave birth to. I bury it in my womb. Down with the happiness of submission. Long live hatred and contempt, rebellion and death. When she walks through your bedrooms carrying a butcher knife you'll know the truth.

Stage Directions. *The men exit. Ophelia remains on stage, motionless in her white wrappings.* (Scene 5)

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Actual performance would probably find opportunities for an even fuller range of moods, but whatever the case may be, both the overall and supporting moods in *Hamletmachine* are passionate (which doesn't necessarily mean shouted). However, mood in our play is not about expressionistic personal or mythic suffering (though there is plenty of that) but suffering for or against a failed way of life. Hamlet and Ophelia live in an oppressive political environment. The source of their passion is not in them "personally" or "mythically," but comes from habits acquired from a failed way of life and enforced by a coldblooded political establishment.

Idea

Hamletmachine is about "unintended consequences." It argues that traditional political idealism is not necessarily a solution to contemporary political problems but has led instead to the creation of political dystopias. Moreover, the cycle of idealism/failure has become historically predictable. Initially, there is euphoria from achieving a new way of life—Hooray! Utopia has arrived! But eventually the euphoria

wears off and the new way of life becomes ordinary, then old and unpleasant, and finally unsustainable, prompting a new group of political idealists to undertake a fresh set of reforms and revolutions, which, according to the play's argument, only serve to repeat the same cycle with no sign of its ever ending. All the literary quotations and paraphrases, all the historical references, and, as we have seen, the main and subplots are expressive of this repeated cycle of political idealism and political failure, a dialectic of opposites. What matters here most is an awareness that in *Hamletmachine* this dialectic of opposites is neither a partiality toward one or the other nor a retreat from their inherent contradictions.

Physical Production

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The single feature of *Hamletmachine* that critics seem to comment on most often is its physical production, the organized joining together of acting, staging, scenery, lighting, costumes, sound, makeup, and audience to produce the play in performance. "Organized" is the crucial term here because it is not clear how *Hamletmachine* should be organized for production. The given circumstances have shown how impractical it would be to represent time and place in traditional realistic terms. It would be equally impossible, if not dangerous, to realistically represent much of the spoken action as well, containing as it does so many references to violence, crowd scenes, and events requiring unusually complex technology and staging. Besides, how should the characters' behavior be expressed in psycho-physical terms?

The physical production is similarly challenging with nonrealistic plays in general. However, the key to the physical production in nonrealistic plays can usually be found in or emerge from careful study of the text. Carefully studying the text of *Hamletmachine* is essential too, of course, but this sort of investigation by itself will not be able to provide a means to organizing its physical production. We sometimes hear of a play's physical production being overly restrictive of the designer or director's imaginations from certain requirements in the text, stage directions, time, locale, etc. Actors, directors, and designers who wish to produce *Hamletmachine*, however, must come to terms with the opposite challenge: freedom of imaginings. Every production of *Hamletmachine* needs to be brand new, emphatically more so than a traditional dramatic play.

The Postmodern Viewpoint in *Hamletmachine*

Here we can finally stop to assess what we have learned about *Hamletmachine*. Thus far, its distinguishing features may be summarized as follows:

- Negligible plot
- Radical shifts of time and place
- Ironic tone
- Report format
- Beginning-middle-end structure
- Political theme
- Recognizable super-objectives and through-actions
- Scenario text format
- Autonomous progressions
- Framing story and subplots
- Complicated and indeterminate
- Variety of character drawing modes
- Poetic prose and free-verse
- Extensive use of monologues
- Many historical and literary digressions
- Three distinctive social groups
- Fragmented characters
- Conflict of the individual vs. society
- Extensive stage directions
- Predominance of meaning over other elements
- Sharp contrasts of tempo-rhythm-mood

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The customary features of drama (Aristotle's six elements) are reorganized in a non-standard order of importance and frequently expressed in a non-standard way. Time, place, and action are treated with a free hand. The customary operation of character is considerably altered. Changed as well is realistic psychology, the domestic partner of modern character depiction. The author's customary control of the text is reassigned to the advantage of directorial stylishness, designerly physical production, and actorly improvisation (as we shall see in more detail ahead). The customary cause-and-effect organization of plot is replaced in favor of independent events and digressions. Realistic plausibility is rearranged in favor of dream logic, moving away from a central meaning instead of toward it. That being said, and as we have

shown above, quite a few of *Hamletmachine's* distinguishing features can readily be found in less problematic plays as well, including many standard and classic plays. What's more, again as we have shown, *Hamletmachine* unquestionably forms a coherent arrangement of dramatic action, setting, and character behavior—features that typify successful plays of any kind. In other words, *Hamletmachine* is not, or not only, a collection of non-standard features, but more importantly a specific point of view that governs these features and classifies the whole work as postmodern.

How is that so? Earlier we said that the point of view, or theme, of *Hamletmachine* could be expressed variously as “The unintended outcomes of misguided political idealism” or “The price of misguided political idealism is high” or perhaps “Be careful of the political ideals we desire.” These formulations are correct as far as they go, but not completely so. For two reasons, Ophelia's epilogue was intentionally excluded from our initial assessment of the theme; first, because it was initially important to understand what is “realistic” in *Hamletmachine*—that is, explicitly *not* postmodern; and second, because Ophelia's line of action turns out to be the impelling source of the play's postmodern viewpoint.

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Looking more carefully at Hamlet's three lines of action, we find their primary objective is to be that of a liberator. Hamlet_{1,2} are expected to liberate a way of life, while Hamlet₃ wishes to liberate a way of thinking. All three Hamlets are opposed to their tasks. The special awareness here is that instead of looking for the source of this aversion *inside* themselves, as Shakespeare's Hamlet does, our Hamlets are capable of searching for the source *outside* themselves, at the ways of life and ways of thinking around them. As intellectuals schooled in history and philosophy, they cannot stop themselves from thinking about the consequences of their politically idealistic impulses. King Hamlet was a “liberator” too, as was Claudius after him. Both of them obtained power by persuading others that an old way of life was inferior and the new way of life they proposed would be superior, a utopia. King Hamlet and Claudius, both of them charismatic leaders, turned out to be false liberators. By the same token, the utopian revolutions of the modern type that Hamlet₂ is euphorically caught up in have led to similar disappointments—witness the modern political uprisings in the USSR, Cuba, China, Northern Ireland, South Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and—some would argue—Europe and the United States in recent times as well. Thus, to Hamlet₃ the outcomes of political idealism as a whole appear to be misguided because the desired ends seldom have, if ever, been achieved, or only

fleetingly so. What is to be done? The only option, Hamlet₃ feels, is to destroy the original architects of these ideological wish-dreams: Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong. Then he deserts his post and travels to another country in hopes of finding a better way of life somewhere else. With their misguided political ideologies out of the way, Hamlet₃ reasons, perhaps a lastingly humane way of life, a life "without isms," could somehow materialize. Our three Hamlets are exhausted both from action and from failure to act. Ultimately, they all surrender to or separate themselves from their historical and philosophical backgrounds, isolating themselves from the way of life around them. We are tempted to empathize with them, except that something else in the play leads us to regard their actions only as apathy or indifference.

That "something else" is embodied in Ophelia. Hamlet₃ conveniently disappears during her reawakening as a radical feminist, and, in the final scene, as a radical revolutionary. She does not have an official ideology. She has not published any formal manifestoes or formed any political action groups. She merely believes that the destruction of all existing political and social institutions is necessary for the future improvement of the world. Her view of the world, seen for what it is, is also another ism: nihilism, total rejection of accepted social and political norms. Ironically, it is the failed political ideals of the three Hamlets that have made the conditions of life so feeble as to render her nihilism desirable for its own sake.

Here may be seen the play's skepticism toward isms of any kind, and, ironically, skepticism toward abandoning isms altogether—skepticism even toward skepticism itself. The attempt to undermine its conclusions explains the controlling role of irony in full-dress postmodernism. It may be reassuring to see Hamlet₃ as the sympathetic carrier of the play's meaning—political idealism has failed, so the best course of action would be that of a journalist; that is, merely to expose the problem and let the chips fall where they may. On the other hand, Ophelia's line of action undermines this viewpoint and shows it to be problematic as well. Notice that in Scene 4 Hamlet₃ "tears up the author's photograph," figuratively questioning Müller's position as an unbiased observer. The different personas of these four characters illustrate the problems and misdirections of being a reformer or revolutionary in a culture of miscellaneous hopes and fears that we call postmodernism. Not Shakespeare's "To be *or* not to be" but Müller's "To be *and* not to be" is the operative question here. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* provides a consoling conclusion (death and heroism); Müller's *Hamletmachine* emphasizes the paradoxes

in the question itself, while also admitting its provisional status. *Hamletmachine* offers no open conflict or even a conclusion in the accepted sense, just the experience of one unresolved question after another, including that of the question itself.

In Search of the Postmodern Viewpoint

We have attempted to come to terms with a specific postmodern play in the practical terms favored by actors, directors, and designers. In doing so, we have tried to uncover its non-standard characteristics by comparing them with the traditional dramatic elements studied in the previous chapters. Emerging from this multitude of explanations, we can now try to piece together those features that might be considered characteristic of postmodern drama in general.

Idea: Skepticism Instead of Empathy

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Traditional dramatic plays call for empathy—sympathetic understanding of the situations, feelings, and motives of the characters, if not the characters themselves. Such plays rely on the assumption that actors, directors, and designers are capable of understanding and experiencing empathy and communicating it effectively across the footlights. Compassion lies behind the dreams of a better world and images of those dreams fulfilled, changed, delayed, frustrated, or shattered, which in turn form the plots, characters, and meanings of practically all traditional dramatic plays. Empathy ensures that audiences share these ideals in a hopeful and reassuring manner as part of our common humanity.

By contrast, the postmodern viewpoint necessitates “incredulity toward metanarratives.” Incredulity, or skeptical understanding, questions the notion of empathy regarding ideas considered “natural” or those that “go without saying.” Skeptical understanding suggests the need to question and explain first. Then, if something should happen to turn out to be necessary after all that, it merely hints at a need to work for change. In the practical sense employed in this book, metanarratives take the form of the seed of the play; and so, skeptical understanding calls for a constant willingness to criticize the metanarrative/seed that shores up the given imaginary way of life, the special world of the play. It might even be said that the very purpose of postmodern drama is to make a form available for the expression of incredulity.

Sometimes postmodern plays may do without the self-critical part of the postmodern equation. Postmodern plays that deal with

identity politics—feminism, post-colonialism, sexuality, race, and ethnicity, for instance—share postmodernism's skepticism toward dominant controlling belief systems. With few exceptions, however, such plays do not deal with their culpability in them, maintaining a clear division between only two alternatives—prejudice vs. tolerance, feminism vs. patriarchal tyranny, colonialism vs. independence, and so forth. Perhaps rightly so, they stop short of postmodernism's self-inclusive skepticism. Other postmodern plays deal with issues of mass culture but provide conclusions that are hopeful rather than self-contradictory. Postmodern plays dramatize skepticism, employing it as a category of artistic work. The following ideas will become clearer when keeping in mind the range of skeptical understandings found in postmodern plays.

Idea: Irony and Humor Instead of Committed Moral Seriousness

Traditional dramatic plays tend to deal with moral principles in an explicitly serious-minded manner. Consider the plays of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Henrik Ibsen, Luigi Pirandello, Maxim Gorky, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller, among others. Even the comedies of Shaw and Wilde are considered to be "serious" theatre. *Hamletmachine*, on the other hand, takes the form of an ironically humorous exposé. The exposé is evident from what has been studied above, but where is the ironic humor? It comes from the mechanical inflexibility of the characters and their blind devotion to patently questionable ideals. The stubborn attempts of the characters to protest against a failed way of life (Hamlet₁), run away from it (Hamlet₂), evaluate it "impartially" (Hamlet₃), or destroy it (Ophelia) are not funny ha-ha, but humorous in an ironic way. *Hamletmachine* and other postmodern plays are ironically humorous in the same way the behavior of Alceste in Molière's play *The Misanthrope* is ironic: the good thing is Alceste protests against the falseness of society; the ironic humor comes from our awareness that his protest is at best meaningless and at worst counterproductive because, ironically, by running away he is leaving society in the hands of its worst exemplars. Brecht's *Mother Courage* offers another, perhaps more relevant, example of postmodern irony. A misreading of the play would ask the audience to sympathize with Mother Courage as an unwitting victim of war. However, war is a metaphor for big business in Brecht's play, which, in turn, asks the audience to consider Mother Courage ironically; that is, as an active if an unwitting participant

in her victimization. In postmodern plays, spectators are invited to review the actions of the characters not, or not only, from the sympathetic perspective of the characters themselves, but primarily from the skeptical attitude of the way of life being evaluated.

It's hard to avoid noticing evidence of humor in *Hamletmachine* and, by logical extension, in postmodern plays generally. The pervasive images of exaggerated violence (coffins torn open, bleeding women, skulls cleaved by axes, a despoiled wedding gown, characters emerging from the grave) side by side with images of cultural icons (Mao, Lenin, Marx, Ulrike Meinhof, Squeaky Fromm, Ophelia's fondness for self-dramatization, Hamlet in drag)—all this could be regarded as seriously overdramatic if it was not for some evidence of a humorous sensibility, including camp humor. Nowadays, art needs humor or at least some acknowledgment of its absurdity expressed in an awkward or disorderly way. Admittedly, the existence of humor and deliberate awkwardness in *Hamletmachine* is debatable, but the play itself loses none of its power or meaning from such features, while at the same time it would gain a significant measure of *au courant* (i.e., postmodern) entertainment value.

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Plot: Episodic Instead of Dramatic/Climactic

The type of plot that critics call episodic Brecht famously called epic and the practice itself epicization. His explanation is worth quoting:

For a genuine story to emerge it is important that the scenes to start with should be played quite simply one after another, using the experience of real life, without taking account of what follows or even the play's [apparent] overall sense. The story then unreels in a contradictory manner; the individual scenes retain their own meaning; they yield (and stimulate) a wealth of ideas; and their sum, the story, unfolds authentically without any cheap all-pervading idealization (one word leading to another) or directing of subordinate, purely functional component parts to an ending in which everything is resolved.

(Brecht, 1992: 279)

In other words, each scene stands relatively on its own and does not necessarily contain the germ of the next. A glance back through the chain of external and internal events will confirm the organization

of *Hamletmachine* and its component scenes is not always reasoned consecutively but more often episodically, or epically, in the sense of Brecht's quotation here. Incidentally, Müller worked as a dramaturg under Brecht at the Berliner Ensemble and later was appointed Artistic Director there.

Dialogue: Wide-Ranging References Instead of Concentrated Direct Speech

The wide range of external references employed in most postmodern plays is a logical outgrowth of what Brecht called literarization, a practice he applied in his works as early as 1930, and before him directors Erwin Piscator as early as 1922 and Vsevolod Meyerhold as early as 1920. At one time or another, all of them used titles, placards, film, and other external resources (literature, history, classical and mass culture, etc.) in their plays to "make contact with other institutions for intellectual activities as a way to obtain access to 'higher things'" (Brecht, 1992: 44). For Eisenstein, Piscator, Meyerhold, and their postmodern descendants the direct speech used in traditional dramatic plays is not sufficient to say everything that needs to be expressed in the action. A similar attitude is that creators and audiences are asked to think not only within the limits of the action but also about the *subject* of the action. Allusions, explanatory comments, mime, and other ways of "turning back to check a point" are introduced into postmodern plays to accomplish this purpose (Brecht, 1992: 44). Naturally, audiences are hardly able to notice all the external references in the performance, especially when experienced only in a single viewing. Actors, directors, and designers, however, have the responsibility to discover and express all the external references that contribute to the expression of the play's entire meaning.

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Plot: Montage Instead of Narrative Sequence

This combination of epicization and literarization exists throughout much of postmodern drama and produces one of its most distinctive structural features, similar to the practice of "montage." According to pioneering Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein, montage is the collision of two or more independent ideas from which a new idea emerges and in which each successive element is perceived not only next to one another but also on top of one another. Similar to "sampling" in music and "distributed narrative" in information studies, montage does not express meaning through step-by-step

development of story and character, but by “connecting the dots” among an accumulation of seemingly unrelated references, facts, insights, images of all sorts, and, most important, questions. These images are connected, of course, only not in the standard way of traditional dramatic plays. It is their oppositional nature that is central, the opposition of crucial images or the same image made in different circumstances by which a given montage obtains its sense of coherence. The critical issue is the process of linkage (connecting the dots) through careful selection and arrangement, a tie that does not have its intended meaning outside the specific process at hand. So, all definitions of montage have a common denominator: that meaning is not inherent in any one image but is created by the association, or network, of images.

Although the concept of montage is generally applied to film and painting, its built-in sense of conflict, or opposition, indicates that montage is at work in *Hamletmachine* and other postmodern plays as well. Not necessarily traditional conflict as such, but a sort of thematic debate lies at the heart of postmodern plays, organizing their elements internally. In the case of *Hamletmachine*, where politics and psychology are so profoundly interwoven, those oppositions are utopia (political idealism)/dystopia, democracy/dictatorship, idealism/revenge, idealism/failure, idealism/opportunism, idealism/guilt, and idealism/power.

Here is where the concept of organic unity discussed earlier comes back into play. Figuratively speaking, the repeated external references to utopia/dystopia or idealism/failure in *Hamletmachine* combine to form a thematic montage extending beneath the entire play. The “oppositions” found in this montage fill out and enrich the theme traditionally derived from plot, character, and digressions individually. Montage in this sense is a distinctive feature, even a defining characteristic, of *Hamletmachine*.

Character: Meaning Instead of Personal Goals

One of the trickiest differences between postmodern plays and traditional dramatic plays is the relationship between character and meaning or idea. We have said that Hamlet₃’s super-objective is “to expose and evaluate a failed way of life.” In traditional dramatic terms, the active person in this statement is Hamlet₃ and his goal, his “verb,” is to evaluate a failed way of life. In postmodern plays, there is another factor, another force to be reckoned with besides those

of the individual characters. Hamlet₃ is still an active person, still a “character,” but in postmodern terms, his super-objective would be “to show that political idealism leads Hamlet₃ to assess a failed way of life.” Thus, the real focus of postmodern drama is not, or not only, on the plot and characters, but mainly on a way of life governed by anism, an ideology. In postmodern plays, the super-objective is nearly always expressive of this kind of power relationship between characters and a way of life, between personal goals and the metanarrative/seed at the heart of the play. In traditional dramatic plays the characters’ relationships with other characters comprise the primary action; in postmodern plays, the characters’ relationship with a given way of life comprises the primary action.

Creative Ensemble Instead of Privileged Creative Authority

How are acting, directing, and design affected by the postmodern viewpoint? Consider that theatre is also a metanarrative, a system of beliefs that many of us consider “natural” and that “go without saying.” For the past 150 years that particular metanarrative has privileged the director and playwright, a “top-down” model similar to, if not patterned on, the large businesses that have emerged during the same period. Instead, Müller and like-minded postmodern artists give quite a different impression, implying, as it were, “Who knows if this organizational metanarrative is crucial?”

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In recent years, physical production has played an increasing role in expressing the internal and external life of the play—no more so than in postmodern performance. Increasing use of scenarios instead of standard play texts; fragmented instead of psychologically consistent characters; perplexing physical production; open-ended and non-authoritative themes; montages of images instead of conventional narrative sequence—by these simple acts postmodern dramatists have empowered the production team as a whole while effectively setting limits to the presumed leadership of the director and playwright. This is what was meant above by freedom of imaginings in forming the physical production.

But actors and designers should not become carried away by the euphoria of this new-found creative freedom. Indeed, Müller’s (and by extension postmodernism’s) unspoken call for actors and designers to become more proactively engaged in the creative process is correspondingly a call to a new way of life in the theatre altogether,

with its consequences as yet unknown. What precisely would the new responsibilities of actors, directors, and designers be in this hoped-for new way of life? In what new ways would postmodern actors and designers play a more significant role in the process of play production? After all, under such “idealistic” conditions the working relations among actors, directors, designers, and playwrights would be vastly different from what is currently operational in the theatre. At a minimum, it would require a wholesale overhaul of the production calendar, together with re-conceptualization and re-actualization of the physical production and even reorganization of auditions and rehearsals. And what about audience expectations? Actors and designers may reasonably take a dim view of the privileged position claimed by playwrights and directors in traditional dramatic theatre, but when all is said and done, the expectations that go along with postmodern ensemble creation may be even more demanding.

Summary

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Plays make use of people, places, and events to puzzle out big problematic ideas. This chapter has tried to show that postmodern plays tend to use such ideas as grounds for expressing as much as possible—both positive and negative—about the system of beliefs behind a given way of life. A generally skeptical attitude, irony and humor, episodic arrangement, wide-ranging references, montage, prominence of meaning, and ensemble-devised physical production are just as important or sometimes more important than the events and characters themselves. Events and characters are mainly a framework for sketches and commentaries for and against a given way of life or system of belief. Momentum in this arrangement derives not, or not only, from the plot, but the subtle progressive build-up of thematic associations. Thus, entertainment value maintains itself not because, or not only because, the play leads to something conclusive, but mainly because it is engaging from moment to moment, a feeling like that arising from the collection of fantastic events in *Angels in America*. Admittedly, postmodern plays can sometimes turn into aesthetic game-playing and displays of virtuoso technique, but this pirating should not serve as an opportunity for underestimating the goals and achievements of postmodernism altogether or excusing its weaknesses. Art needs its radicals as well as those who work within the tradition.

All generalizations about art call out for qualification. This statement is especially true of postmodernism, which is good at perplexing and confusing those who try to label it. And so, trying to say more about postmodernism to cover all its various indicators in plays would be of little practical value at this point. Such an attempt would only lead to more puzzlement and contribute to the lack of exactness already apparent in the use of the term. In any case, for postmodernism itself, the journey is far more important than the destination.

Appendix A

The Score of a Role

The Score of a Role

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The score of a role is a systematic collection of the playable dramatic values essential to a character. Just as Action Analysis (Chapter 1) applied to an entire play is equivalent to the score of a production, so also Action Analysis applied to a single character is equivalent to the score of a role. This method is one of the most practical ways to see a character quickly and whole. A score is not a substitute for all the details and layers discoverable through formalist analysis (Chapters 2–10), but it can provide enough information to begin table rehearsals.

To give a demonstration of the score of a role, we will analyze the character of Ophelia from *Hamlet*. Chapter 1 provided definitions for all the parts of Action Analysis and the procedures for determining them. The practical value of the score of a role should become self-evident from the following account.

Chain of External Events

The score of a role is only concerned with those events in which a specific character appears on stage, whether speaking or silent. Ophelia takes part in six external events:

- 1,2: Claudius takes over the throne
- 1,3: Laertes departs for France
- 2,1: Polonius gives instructions to Reynaldo
- 3,1: Claudius eavesdrops on Hamlet and Ophelia

- 3,2: The “mousetrap scene”
- 4,5: Laertes returns to Elsinore

This list is how we defined the external events in Chapter 1 when dealing with Action Analysis for the entire play. To establish the score for Ophelia, we need to revise the descriptions to concentrate on her role. The following descriptions do so while using the same kind of brevity and simplicity promoted earlier.

- 1,2: Ophelia attends the accession of Claudius
- 1,3: Ophelia says good-bye to Laertes
- 2,1: Ophelia seeks advice from Polonius
- 3,1: Ophelia returns Hamlet’s gifts
- 3,2: Ophelia meets Hamlet in public
- 4,5: Ophelia presents flowers to Claudius and Gertrude

Initial Review of the Facts

Who is Ophelia? She is the daughter of the chief advisor to the new king of Denmark and lover of the prince and former heir-apparent.

What is she doing? She is working out how her situation has changed regarding Hamlet, her father, and her brother.

Where is she doing it? In the unpredictable world created by Denmark’s new leadership.

When is she doing it? Approximately four months between the return of Hamlet from Wittenberg and her suicide.

Why is she doing it? Suddenly everyone is ignoring her, and no one is telling her why.

How is she doing it? She is worriedly assessing, measuring, evaluating, and judging what everyone is saying and doing.

For what reason is she doing it? She feels that she has done something wrong and seeks to find a way to set things right.

Summary. The broad outlines of Ophelia’s role are already emerging: her father treats her as a piece of property, her brother abandons her, her lover rejects her, her father forces her to give up the person she loves, her lover torments her, and so she escapes into the past where she used to be happy.

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Seed and Subtheme/Leitmotif

Previously, we determined that the seed of *Hamlet* is idealism. Moreover, since the seed by definition influences all the characters,

it follows that idealism also influences Ophelia. In her own way, she is an idealist as well, a *romantic idealist*. However, while the theme of the play is “the unintended consequences of reckless idealism,” that formulation applies only to Hamlet. Ophelia’s idealism is not of the reckless variety. She asks only that Hamlet, Laertes, and Polonius should love and understand her as they used to do.

Moreover, she does not attempt to impose her idealism on others, as Hamlet does. It is the others who assault her with their brands of distorted idealism and cynicism. Thus, Ophelia’s attitude toward the seed—called her *subtheme* or *leitmotif*—could be described as “romantic idealism betrayed.”

Sequence of Internal Events

One by one, Ophelia’s ideals are betrayed. The internal events below describe this process.

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- 1,2: External: Ophelia attends the accession of Claudius
Internal: Ophelia sees that Polonius supports Claudius and that Hamlet is distressed. Two of her ideal figures have suddenly become unrecognizable
- 1,3: External: Laertes says good-bye to Ophelia
Internal: Laertes, another of her former ideal figures, deserts her
- 2,1: External: Ophelia seeks help from Polonius
Internal: She vainly seeks her father’s help when Hamlet, her most revered ideal figure, rejects her
- 3,1: External: Ophelia returns Hamlet’s gifts
Internal: Her father forces her to lie to Hamlet and Hamlet warns her against submitting to the way of the world
- 3,2: External: Ophelia meets Hamlet in public
Internal: Hamlet, formerly her ideal gentleman-courtier-lover, publicly torments her
- 4,5: External: Ophelia presents flowers to Claudius and Gertrude
Internal: Ophelia bids farewell to the way of the world and returns to the ideal world in the past, where she was happy

Three Major Climaxes

Every role has a beginning, middle, and end just as a play does. Since there are only six major events to deal with, these climaxes are not difficult to recognize here. The first major climax occurs when

Ophelia's ideal world—composed of her father, her brother, and Hamlet—changes completely with the accession of Claudius to the throne. The second major climax—the middle or tipping point of her development—occurs in 3,1, where she is forced to act in opposition to everything she holds good and true by lying to Hamlet about her love for him. The third major climax—the end for her—is in 4,5, where she says her farewell to this world of innocent ideals betrayed.

Super-Objective

Discovering Ophelia's super-objective, it is necessary to ask what she wants from life. Let's make several tries at it. She wants Hamlet to love her, she wants to obey her father, she wants to please her brother, she wants things the way they were before Claudius took over, and she wants to be happy once again. What unites these alternatives is Ophelia's belief that something has gone terribly wrong and that, despite her best efforts, she cannot discover what it is. Maybe she has done something wrong herself, something to make everyone hate and abuse her? Therefore, her super-objective could be "to find out what she has done wrong." Innocent and romantically idealistic, it is logical for Ophelia to feel that she is the one at fault instead of the others. The goal "to find out" is consistent with her innocent idealism. Ophelia is not in a position to influence the actions of others.

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Through-Action

Ophelia's through-action is her storyline in the play, her main conflict stated in a single concise sentence. Who is Ophelia? The innocent daughter of a government official. What is she doing? Trying to come to grips with a strange, new world. Where is she doing it? In the corrupt court of Denmark. Hence, her through-action: the innocent daughter of a dishonest official comes to grips with the corrupt environment she is forced to live in. Ophelia is the daughter of a criminal, and she is forced to choose whether she wants to live in her father's corrupt world. She decides not to do so.

Counter Through-Action

Hamlet's chief opponent in the play is Claudius, the ultimate source of corrupted ideals in the court. His relationship with Claudius forms the primary relationship of the play. However, Claudius does

not directly influence Ophelia's behavior. Her actions are affected more by Polonius, Laertes, and, above all, Hamlet—each of whom betrays her. Most readers would agree that Hamlet is the character who influences her most and who betrays her faith in him most hurtfully. He occupies the other position in Ophelia's primary relationship. Accordingly, the counter through-action may be described like this: an angry young prince ruthlessly abandons the innocent young woman who loves him. Ophelia sees Hamlet through her own innocently idealistic eyes, not through his impossibly idealistic eyes.

Appendix B

Functional Analysis for Designers

Functional Analysis for Designers

What Is Functional Analysis?

Weldon Durham's Functional Analysis explores the possible associations arising from the play and then connects those associations with the physical production (scenery, properties, lighting, sound, and costumes) to expand and enhance the expressiveness of the play in production.

The imagined reality of the play (reality as perceived by the characters) suggests the physical conditions within which the actors will perform, and the audience will see and experience the action. It also suggests motifs—social and political ideas, psychological states, emotional and spiritual conditions—that reinforce the action of the play and provide a frame of reference within which the play's events become meaningful. The world of the play or a part of it (i.e., a property), or a costume or a part of it (i.e., a material or an accessory), become functional in this sense when a simple part stands for a complex whole—when a concrete object, reference, or association is suggestive of an intangible, less immediately obvious, and more complex experience.

For example, the “old lock” Kleshtch works on in Act I of Maxim Gorky's play, *The Lower Depths* (1902), is not only decorative but also functional. It does not “just happen” that the Kleshtch is a locksmith. The lock is not described, but an old lock could be rusty, full of dirt and debris, inoperative, and therefore possess dramatic functionality. Those who own things and therefore amount to something need locks and locksmiths to secure their possessions from

thieves. The lock Kleshtch works on is worthless, but it is all he has to express his need to remain busy and useful.

The point is that functional elements of the physical production stimulate the imagination and help the actors and audience to look beyond the external appearance of things on stage to the ideas and motifs contained in the play's action. In a sense, the most completely functional elements of the physical production are those virtually transparent. Kleshtch's lock, Nastya's dog-eared novel, the cave-like cellar where the derelicts live, and the back yard littered with rubbish and overgrown with weeds enhance and expand the main idea of *The Lower Depths*.

Plays speak to knowledgeable designers by way of the physical objects suggested by playwrights in the dialogue, stage directions, and effects of the action. Hence, designers and technicians need to sense the atmosphere and meaning of the play through such suggestions and explore ways to make the production physicalize the atmosphere and meaning of the play.

Method of Functional Analysis

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1. Examine the play for every mention of scenery, lights, properties, sound, and costumes. List these references under separate headings for each act. (Chapter 2)
2. Analyze the play to discover the theme (main idea) and critical motifs. (Chapters 1 and 6)
3. Associate study of the physical production to the theme (main idea) and critical motifs of the play. Identify and assess the atmosphere and meaning expressed through the principal elements of the physical production.
4. Suggest additions to the physical production that could further enhance the theme (main idea) and critical motifs of the play.
5. Develop a comprehensive line of physical production after exploring the facts from the play.

Example: Demands of the Play (Scenery, Properties, Costumes) for The Lower Depths

A. SCENERY

a. Act I

- i. Cellar resembling a cave.
- ii. Heavy vaulted ceiling, smoke-blackened plaster falling in places.

- iii. Square window upstage right, light coming through.
 - iv. A thin partition separates Pepel's room.
 - v. Bunks (not beds) along walls.
 - vi. Large Russian stove (space above is used as a bed).
 - vii. A door in the stone wall left leads to the kitchen (Kvashnya, Baron, Nastya live here).
 - viii. Wide bed enclosed by dirty cotton hangings stands between stove and kitchen door (Anna's bed).
 - ix. Down left is an upturned log with a vice and anvil attached.
 - x. Log for Kleshtch to sit on, old keys strewn around the log on the floor.
 - xi. Large, dirty, unpainted table, two benches, and stool center.
 - xii. Morning in early spring.
- b. Act II: same scene
- i. Two wall lamps, one on the wall near card players (near the stove), other on Bubnoff's bunk.
 - ii. Bar to lock the door.
- c. Act III
- i. Back yard littered with rubbish.
 - ii. It is overgrown with weeds.
 - iii. High brick fire-wall upstage (cuts off the view of the sky).
 - iv. Right—dark log wall (shed or stable).
 - v. Left—Kostyloyov's house, (lodging in the basement), gray, ramshackle, with stucco crumbling off.
 - vi. A narrow passage up center between brick wall and house.
 - vii. Two windows in the house (one basement window downstage—second—six feet higher upstage)
 - viii. Log twelve feet long lies near the house.
 - ix. Wooden sled dilapidated and overturned, near a log.
 - x. Old boards and beams form a pile of wood near the building on the right.
 - xi. A red glow on the brick wall (signifying the end of the day).
 - xii. Early spring (elder bushes as yet without buds).

- xiii. Sounds of dishes crashing.
- xiv. Crow sounds, ragged people.

d. Act IV

- i. A lamp in the center of the table for light.
- ii. Wind is blowing outside.

B. PROPERTIES

a. Act I

- i. Kleshtch—keys and old lock, battered tin samovar, hammer, and files.
- ii. Kvashnya—samovar standing on the table, bowl to serve Anna.
- iii. Baron—a piece of bread.
- iv. Nastya—tattered novel.
- v. Bubnoff—hat block, strips of cloth from an old pair of trousers, bits of rag, oilcloth, pieces of cardboard for making cap visors.
- vi. Baron—wooden yolk for shoulders, two baskets containing crocks covered with dirty rags are suspended from the yolk.
- vii. Actor—something to chew.
- viii. Pepel—some money to give to Actor.
- ix. Bubnoff—needle and thread.
- x. Alyoshka—accordion.
- xi. Luka—broom, pail.

b. Act II

- i. Satin, Krivoy, Zob, Baron, Tatar—a deck of cards.
- ii. Bubnoff, Medvedev game (“draughts”).
- iii. Money for the card game.
- iv. Bubnoff—old rags to spread on the bed.

c. Act III

- i. Natasha—sunflower seeds.

d. Act IV

- i. Bottle of vodka.
- ii. Three bottles of beer.
- iii. Black bread.
- iv. Glasses.

- v. Bubnoff—a string of pretzels.
- vi. Bubnoff—two smoked fish.
- vii. Bubnoff—two bottles of vodka.

C. COSTUMES

a. Act I

- i. Anna—rags for Actor to throw over her shoulders.
- ii. Medvedev—police uniform.

b. Act II

- i. Vassilisa—shawl.

c. Act III

- i. Nastya—Bubnoff says, “A crow in peacock’s feathers.” We get the idea that she is dressed in gaudy clothes. There is also reference to her makeup. She is overdone and cheap looking.
- ii. Kleshtch—rags for clothing.
- iii. Vassilisa “finery”—perhaps somewhat better clothing than is normally seen in the “depths.”
- iv. Tatar—arm in a sling.
- v. Natasha—disheveled. I assume her clothing is torn in places from the flight. Hair is very messy.

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d. Act IV

- i. Medvedev—woman’s quilted jacket.

Example: Associations Arising from the Main Idea, Critical Motifs, Character, and Atmosphere of

The Lower Depths

The scenery elements comprising the physical production (dirt, debris, lack of adequate lighting, garments that are little more than rags, the lack of private living quarters) indicate that these are “men living like beasts.” However, are they “men” and “brothers”? Do they possess “personal dignity” and a philosophy?

Luka seems to be the only figure present who attempts to inject dignity or a positive philosophy into the production. He is a transient influence at best. When he leaves, the characters around him are changed. Anna is dead. Pepel is in jail. Natasha has left. The Actor proceeds to do away with himself. However, the squalor remains. There is a feeling that new characters will enter the physical production, and life in the “lower

depths" will continue permanently without dignity and with a philosophy, based upon a lack of hope. The play gives a view of people living in a state so empty of physical comforts (even necessities) that they do not have time to foster an atmosphere of fellowship and camaraderie.

Anna's death is treated with very little compassion by the majority of the inhabitants of the "lower depths." The Actor, Satin, Pepel, and the rest have their own plights to contemplate. How can they truly be compassionate and treat another's death with dignity when they must always be striving to ward off their own death?

Natasha adds fuel to the argument that the characters who move through the physical production are not, in fact, "brothers." When Pepel is about to be arrested for the murder of Kostiliov, Natasha begins to accuse him too. It seems that she is so involved with her own pain and misery that she leaves her dignity, fellowship and camaraderie, and philosophy of justice behind. When a crisis arises, each character is quick to think only of his survival and abandon his "brother" to survive as best he can.

Though Luka may wish to compromise life in the "lower depths" by talking of fellowship and camaraderie, dignity, and philosophy, there is little dignity in human suffering. The play makes a much more complicated statement. The physical production can only express a feeling of desolation and lack of hope. In such circumstances, humankind's philosophy becomes little more than a struggle for survival, and fellowship and camaraderie cease to exist.

The play says little about color. The scenery design might be executed in grays and browns. These colors give a feeling of dirt, filth, and depression. Nastya might wear very bright but faded colors (red, orange, purple), overdone or gaudy.

Little is said about makeup. It would seem that all of the characters might have deep circles under their eyes from straining in the dim light.

A question comes to mind in dealing with an incredibly realistic production. Does Anna use a bedpan? Perhaps this might be placed by her bed.

Since this is early spring and Nastya lives in a somewhat make-believe world, perhaps a single flower in a rusty can on the table might add a stark contrast between hope and despair.

Appendix C

Further Questions for Script Analysis

Further Questions for Script Analysis

Throughout this book, plays have been treated as independent objects with self-contained frames of reference. The Introduction explains the rationale, history, and development of this point of view. All the same, plays can become fuller artistic experiences upon understanding associations from outside the play as well. When studying the life of the authors, their other works, and their contemporaneous worlds, for example, plays become more intriguing, characters grow, plots thicken, and meaning expands. Plays become part of something on a scale greater than themselves. In other words, while knowledge of external information is not ipso facto knowledge of the play, nevertheless facts lying outside the play can be crucial to its inner working.

Today there are a large number of methods with which to study the external associations in a play. See, for example, *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* (Guerin et al., 2010). As a result, masses of facts, dates, and details can spin off so many potential interpretations (some mutually inconsistent, if not wholly self-contradictory) that such knowledge can seem to be more like a forest than a path. Furthermore, a problem arises in that some methods are in reality general views of the world rather than theories with specified methodologies. In any case, script analysis requires something more than accumulation, because what analysis leaves out can be just as important as what is put in. Those wanting to make use of one or more of these viewpoints responsibly need to begin with the ideas of the original theorists themselves. See in particular *Theory of Literature* (Fry, 2012). Attention to the original theorists and their works will

ensure thoughtful outcomes with potential for significant influence in performance and physical production.

Conceptual Theatre—An Aside

Conceptual art emphasizes selected concepts or ideas over traditional literary content or aesthetic issues. In the latter part of the twentieth century, an innovative form of theatre emerged that is also labeled “conceptual” and for which it might be possible to mark out a certain genealogical line. It begins with the work of Vsevolod Meyerhold, develops in theoretical terms through Antonin Artaud and Edward Gordon Craig, and re-emerges in the practice of Jerzy Grotowski, followed by Eugenio Barba, Peter Brook, Tadeusz Kantor, Peter Stein, Ariane Mnouchkine, Richard Foreman, and Robert Wilson, to name only the best known. Even though conceptual theatre productions have been around for over a century, the form itself continues to avoid a satisfactory definition. Amy S. Green identifies the problem:

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Just what distinguishes conceptual theatre is elusive. The dangers of this line of attack are obvious: everything depends on the tact, taste, and talent of the director. If new values are not unearthed by a new approach . . . the effort is worthless, and if these new values are merely eccentric or irresponsible, then it is careerism rather than art that has been served.

(Robert Brustein qtd in Green, 2006: 12)

Green suggests that trying to describe this approach any further “would be tantamount to giving lessons in original thinking” (Green, 2006: 12). What can be safely said is that conceptual theatre depends less on the criteria of Aristotle and Stanislavsky and more on the “further questions about script analysis” enumerated in this Appendix. Conceptual theatre comes from a structuralist point of view, namely a focus on discreet patterns arising from non-traditional dramatic questions. Whatever the case may be, conceptual theatre is an intriguing phenomenon as well as a growing international presence. Readers wishing to pursue this subject further will find resources in the Bibliography.

Biography and History

A play is sure to be more meaningful after studying the biography of its author and the milieu of his/her period. How are the playwright’s

life and times reflected in the play? Explore the personal, social, political, economic, religious, and artistic circumstances of the author and the period in which the play was written. Does the biography of the dramatist and the historical context in which the play was written suggest anything about the physical production? (Note that specific point-to-point correlations between the author's life and his/her works seldom exist, at least not as often as some would argue. Authors are too skillful and subtle to employ such simplistic methods. The quest for biographical influences will be more rewarding if this advice is kept in mind.)

Textual Study

Try to establish an authoritative text of the play. Are there any other editions or translations? If so, compare and contrast the differences, including spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and italicization as well as any more substantial variations that might appear in the dialogue, characters, scenic organization, and endings. Study the commentary of textual editors and translators for additional insights.

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Communication and Rhetoric

Explore sources of possible interaction among the play, the author, and the audience. How does the process of communication in the play operate among these three groups? What precisely does the play communicate to the audience and how does it do so? What can the play reveal about its author? Whom is the playwright addressing with the play? How is the audience expected to respond? Is there a distinction between the beliefs of the author and those expressed by the characters in the play? Do the communication and rhetorical issues suggest anything about the physical production?

Gender Study

Was the play written by a male, female, gay, or transgender author? Is the author self-identified as such? In what way may gender-related issues have helped to shape the play? What are the visible or latent power imbalances, patriarchal premises, gender prejudices, and other signs of bias in the play or its characters? Are issues of power reflected, endorsed, or questioned by the play? Does environment constrain any genders in the play? Are any genders in the play exploited in ways related to their economic circumstances? Do the

genders in the play experience any further oppression as members of a minority group? Do the gender issues suggest anything about the physical production?

Marxism

Explore any large social, political, economic, or historical forces apparent or latent in the play. Does the play reflect, endorse, or question any of these forces operating in opposition to each other? In particular, can any adverse social effects of the capitalist system be found in the play? How does the play (or the characters in the play) come to terms with issues of class, race, sex, oppression, colonialism, or liberation? Does the play provide a workable solution to widely known socioeconomic problems? Do these issues suggest anything about the physical production?

Myth and Archetype

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Myths are traditional stories, typically about the prehistory of society or some natural or social spectacle, and characteristically including supernatural creatures or events. Archetypes are characters, themes, or situations that express a shared pattern of human experience. Archetypes can be characters such as hero, villain, trickster, mentor, mother, father, son, daughter, and outsider as well as abstract ideas such as quest, sacrifice, death, epiphany, labyrinth, home, entrancement, abandonment, displacement, and rebirth.

Is the play based on a widely known myth? What archetypal patterns does the play highlight, and which ones could summon deeply emotional responses? Are symbolic expressions of hope, fear, ethics, and desire expressed in the play? Does the play connect with any prehistorical supernatural beings or rituals? What is the myth, the abstract core of the action, that gives the play its essential form or meaning? Does the presence of mythic or archetypal elements in the play suggest features of the physical production?

Philosophy and Ethics

Some writers believe the final purpose of literature, including dramatic literature, is to teach ethics and inquire into philosophical issues. Explore ways in which the play relates to the philosophical and ethical norms of its era, the present age, a particular school or circle, or the author. Search for philosophical and ethical issues the play appears

to promote or criticize. Do the philosophical and ethical issues in the play suggest something about the physical production?

Psychology

The psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and his followers emphasize the unconscious aspects of the mind, the sexual motives of behavior (libido), and the involuntary repression of unwelcome memories. These mental processes may be assigned to three different regions, called the id (the source of dangerous aggressions and desires), the ego (the conscious controlling agent of the id), and the superego (conscience and pride). Other Freudian theories include the reality principle, the pleasure principle, the morality principle, and the Oedipus complex, to name only the best known. Explore insights that may be gained from applying Freud's theories to the characters in the play. Do any psychological associations suggest features of the physical production?

Structuralism and Post-Structuralism (Deconstruction)

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Structuralism focuses on recurring patterns of ideas and behaviors in a play. Thus, explore previously unnoticed harmonies (codes), such as related terms, concepts opposite in meaning (binaries), buried structures, and systems of relationships. What words, actions, characters, or physical production matters in the play gain a particular sense from these harmonies? Can the play be equated with cultural norms, language forms, architecture, landscaping, kinship, marriage customs, fashion, restaurant menus, timetables, calendars, street maps, furniture, popular culture, politics, or any other well-known social or cultural phenomenon? If so, what additional harmonies are obtained?

Post-structuralism (deconstruction) comes from the idea that the relationship between words and meaning is inherently unstable, perhaps even unreliable. Search for contradictions, inconsistencies, and incoherencies in the play. Are there any concealed signs of power in the author, play, its time of writing, or present-day that may unintentionally undermine the accepted meaning of the play?

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